

THE DARK ABYSS

LITTLE did Captain Saunders realise as badly wounded, he climbed from his damaged tank at Sunchon, North Korea, that within a few months his life would be irrevocably linked with the beautiful Angélique Balant, who, at the time, was attending a finishing school in Paris

When capture by Communists seemed inevitable Gort Saunders is rescued by a young Englishman, and together they head toward Seoul in a war-scarred jeep From there we follow him home, feel his hurt and disillusionment as, on crutches, he begins the heart-breaking months of rehabilitation

Unable at last to tolerate the sympathy of tactless yet well-meaning friends, he studies an old Air Force map, and decides to seek refuge in the far-off New Hebrides •

It is at Vila, with its squalor, intrigue, mixture of rages, and intense tropical beauty, that he meets and finally falls in love with Angélique But even as the young couple make plans for their future, a shadow, black as the darkest night, glides on merciless wings across their horizons •

Through hurricanes, earth tremors, harsh sunlight and star-smudged skies it floats like some evil thing, to threaten the happiness of many people, in particular Gort Saunders and the woman he loves

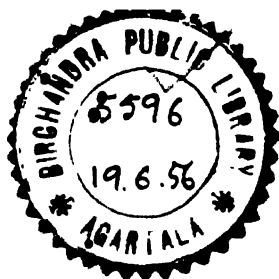
A number of other true-to-life characters step through the pages of this absorbing novel, the lovable "Little Butch", his mother, Madame White, Jake Larkins, Sir George Gollan, also Sister Almond who, as the waters of destiny rise to engulf Gort Saunders, makes a last desperate attempt to snatch him from "The Dark Abyss"

*By the
same Author—*

The Broken Melody
Hell's Doorway
Flames of Convention
Where Gods Are Vain
Broken Wings
The Melody Lingers
The Mad Doctor
The Defender
The Redemption
Rock End
The Mad Doctor in Harley Street
A Man of Destiny
Fever
Whispers in Tahiti
Wind in the Bracken
Shadows Over Rangoon
Out of the Dawn
They Lived That Spring
The Night Closed Down

THE DARK ABYSS

By
FREDERICK J. THWAITES



THE HARCOURT PRESS
67 ST. JAMES'S ST., S.W.1
LONDON

First United Kingdom Edition 1915

MADE AND PRINTED IN ENGLAND BY
THE GARDEN CITY PRESS LIMITED,
LETCHWORTH HERTFORDSHIRE

DEDICATION

When Bambi first came into our lives, she was no larger than a week-old kitten, yet, had she been a full-grown Alsatian with the pedigree of Rin-tin-tin, my two boys, could not have been more impressed or delighted as, in turn, they nursed her on their chubby knees during that never-to-be-forgotten drive home through the autumn dusk.

Over the subsequent six months Bambi's mischievous puppy spirit sorely tried our patience. Every wash-day found her swinging enthusiastically from one of my wife's favourite sheets or table-cloths, and I lost count of the many bulbs planted with that meticulous care a none-too-successful gardener reserves for gladioli or daffodils, only to return home the following afternoon to find them in a neat pile on the centre of our lawn.

All this, of course, happened a long time ago. Today Bambi is a very dignified old lady who, true to her aristocratic Kelpie blood, is the essence of good manners.

Together we've watched many seasons come and go; stood at the door of my study and followed the course of autumn's first gold leaf, fluttering earthwards; sat before log fires and listened to boisterous winter winds hurtling across Bong Bong Hill, and months later walked side by side in our garden studying the glory of nature bursting into bud.

Thus, in homage to a devoted heart, I dedicate this book to our canine friend, who, despite her sex and femininity, we for some unknown reason christened Bambi.

F. J. THWAITES.

"Buckingbong,"

Moss Vale,

N.S.W.

***All characters and incidents in
this book are fictitious.***

CHAPTER I

THE man's eyes, grey pools of deep-seated weariness until a moment ago, underwent a quick transformation when, after a supreme effort of will, he dragged his blood-soaked shoulders through the turret of a snow-covered General Patton tank.

Captain Saunders of the U.S. 27th Infantry Battalion was about all in and knew it. For over eighteen hours he had been playing a grim game of hide-and-seek with four Communist-manned Russian-built tanks, which, more by good luck than skill, he had been able to shake off some ten miles back.

On reaching the outskirts of Sunchon he'd muttered a low "We've made it, fellers." But a few minutes later, as he drew the battered tank to an abrupt halt, anger replaced the glazed expression in his eyes. Through binoculars he studied the burning town in detail—a frightening sight this. Long tongues of flame were licking at the dusk—climbed one upon the other, leaping from roof to roof, and every few seconds the earth heaved as a petrol dump exploded with a shattering, ear-splitting roar. Above the smoke-filled valley he watched a seemingly never-ending stream of lorries, jeeps and men making towards Pyongyang.

"Oh hell!"

Captain Saunders' face twisted grotesquely under its coating of blood and grime as he allowed the glasses to slip from his unsteady hands. Since around noon of yesterday he had prayed to make this place. It had meant more to him than just another North Korean town, much more. His had been the first tank to enter Sunchon—in fact, Hank Gibbons and he had hoisted the United Nations' flag on the top of that smouldering building down there only forty-one days before.

"Forty-one days." The man smiled bitterly. "What a screwy war!" Sure—sure, they'd entered Sunchon as victors with the game all sewn up. How the natives had cheered—painted signs on their windows reading "UNITED NATIONS' FORCES, WE WELCOME YOU." And now thousands of the poor devils were homeless and disillusioned as they fell in with that crawling line of defeated men.

Gort Saunders stood for a long time staring into space. Then with a sharp "Better take a look-see," headed his tank down the hillside.

Dusk had settled before he entered the town, now just a smoking ruin. Here and there a few flames curled along fallen rafters, sent occasional showers of sparks heavenwards. They alone had a voice—their hissing triumph filled the night.

Outside what, till that morning, had been United Nations' Headquarters he shut off the motor, and after ramming a few items such as cigarettes, matches and a bar of chocolate into his tunic pocket, he turned slowly.

"God!" The word curled from Gort's lips as his bloodshot eyes took in that dreadful sight. Hank Gibbons sprawled out there on his back—Bud Torrence, lovable kid, Bud, who was always singing "Galway Bay." Look at him now, though, half of his face blown away. Tony Cilento leaning against a pile of ammunition belts like a guy asleep with his eyes open. Russ Gryson—there was a soldier for you—didn't know the meaning of either fear or pain—he'd died the hard way. Gibbons, Torrence and Cilento had gone out quickly—one second they were making wisecracks about MacArthur's "You'll be at home for Christmas" prophecy, and the next were dying men. Russ hadn't been so lucky. That lump of shrapnel in his throat had left him inarticulate, yet he'd lain there for hours grinning like a clown.

Captain Saunders shrugged. Yes, perhaps he should do the right thing—search their pockets for those little things treasured by the folks back home—photographs—letters, etc. But he didn't feel up to it. Fact was, if he didn't get out of this steel oven he'd be roasted alive.

Stung into action, he made as if to lift his pain-racked body through the turret, when something drew his gaze towards the stiff figure of Bud Torrence. Suddenly he heard himself speaking aloud in a voice that travelled around the tank's hollow interior like a lost echo:

"Sorry, fellers, for leaving you like this. I reckoned on giving you all a decent burial when we reached Sunchon, but it's too late; already the Communists are closing in, and I've got to find me a jeep, or else—that is, if I'm still capable of driving one."

The speaker's lips formed themselves into an ugly leer as he went on:

"Sure, sure, I know what I've got to do when I get home—tell those experts off pronto—told us this old jalopy was the

finest tank in the world, but we proved them wrong, didn't we?—proved it's not in the race with the Joseph Stalin No. 3. This is what I'm going to say, Bud, Russ, Tony and Hank. I'll say: 'Look here, you fellers, if we're to win this or any other war, give us something comparable to the equipment of the guys we're supposed to kill—comparable or better. And remember, while you're working on those blue-prints, that men's lives are dependent on every stroke of your pencils. Don't send us out to fight with ninety-millimetre guns when the other guys have a hundred and twenty-two's—might as well arm us with——' "

The nausea, which all day had been heaving against his throat, gave a violent lunge. Twice while being sick, Captain Saunders feared he would lose consciousness, but eventually the spasm passed, and after running a hand across his bile-smearred lips, he stepped over the bodies of Hank Gibbons and Russ Cryson.

Gort would never quite know how he struggled out of his damaged tank—he had a hazy recollection of forcing his body through the turret, of stumbling and falling heavily, then walking, rolling from side to side like a drunken man, towards where an abandoned Red Cross wagon was parked. Gaining it, he muttered a grateful "You beaut!" on noticing a key in the ignition lock. It took him a good three minutes to drag himself behind the steering-wheel, and another to gather sufficient strength to release the hand-brake. He cursed quietly when the truck, despite the slight incline, refused to budge, then he turned on the key and pushed the starter button. Nothing happened.

He tried again, kept prodding desperately with his toe at the accelerator. A few minutes of this, however, and that low, whining sound which heralds failing batteries made him glance helplessly across the rubble-littered road. There was a bicycle over there, but could he push it? No, sir! Anyhow, the bloody thing was probably punctured. Yet he had to get out of Sunchon quick-smart—thousands of those little yellow swine would be here soon and—sure, he was scared—hadn't he seen enough brutal examples of what happened to prisoners of the North Koreans? Last Tuesday, for instance, that young Aussie tied to a tree with—no, he'd better not start thinking about it—felt sick enough already.

"Hell's bells!—was that a motor starting? Yes, but whose? Better make sure before shouting; though—couldn't afford to take any risks."

He fell, rather than stepped, from the wagon, but on regaining his feet reached eagerly for the Bren gun which rested on the seat. Panic had given Gort Saunders a new reservoir of strength. Suddenly he had become oblivious of pain or fatigue. Somewhere in that pall of smoke a car was moving, coming towards him by the sound of its back-firing motor, and by hell he wanted transport—even if it meant tackling twenty Commos single-handed.

Going down on one knee, he pressed the gun's butt hard against his hip and waited—kept traversing its barrel from right to left. That spluttering sound was quite close now—he heard, yet could not see, the vehicle, as it lurched towards him wrapped in a swirling cloud of smoke. Suddenly the man's body grew tense and his forefinger, hugging the trigger, tightened. A jeep, eh, and——

"Hold it!" he yelled, swinging the gun aloft and staggering forward. "Hold it, soldier."

Through the ever-thickening mist swimming before his flickering vision he noticed the vehicle draw to a skidding halt—caught a brief glimpse of a short figure running towards him. "Well, what do you know!—an Englishman—only looked a kid too. What was he saying?"

When Gort Saunders regained consciousness the jeep was ploughing its way through a particularly deep bank of snow—he felt the chain-bound tyres digging viciously into the white crust and the occasional broadside movement of their vehicle. For a while he did not stir, just lay there, studying the back of his companion's fair curly head silhouetted against a moody sky.

So he had passed out, eh? Wonder was, how that kid had managed to get him into the jeep. Didn't weigh more than nine stone, judging by his thin shoulders. Where were they heading for anyway? Probably Seoul, it—— He gave a sharp cry of pain when the jeep's front wheels lifted suddenly, muttered a hoarse "Oh, Christ!" and waited for the back wheels to follow suit. The vehicle had stopped by the time he had untangled his long legs from the hood's frame.

"I'm awfully sorry," he heard the young Englishman say; "didn't see the damn thing till I was right on it—shook you up a bit, eh?"

"Sure did." The older man's voice was distressed, yet a tight grin framed his mouth as he looked in the direction of the boyish figure kneeling on the bucket seat. "What happened?"

"A log—blew our light fuse, too, worse luck. Here, let me help you up."

"I'd rather make it myself," Gort muttered as the other leant forward and placed both hands under his armpits. "I've quite a hole in my shoulder—hurts like hell every time I move."

"Then how about climbing over here?" The Englishman's voice, beautifully modulated, sounded small in the vast spaces. "Much better riding, you know."

"Will in a minute—what's your name?"

"Cartwright—Lieutenant Cartwright, 14th Rifles."

"Fine—just call me Gort." The wounded man had gained his feet and was already climbing painfully into the front seat. "Let's forget we're soldiers for a while—smoke?"

"Thanks so much—don't bother, I have matches."

"Swell!"

After lighting a cigarette, Captain Saunders took one quick draw, then watched his companion do likewise. In the flickering glow he saw the lean aristocratic face of a man still on the right side of twenty-four. An almost perfect set of gleaming white teeth showed beneath a somewhat bedraggled moustache, and above it blue eyes—strangely blue—reminded him of that lake near his home on a sunny September morning—warm, friendly, unruffled.

Lieutenant Cartwright broke the short silence.

"Might as well just sit for a while, what say, old chap?"

"Good idea."

Bucket seats, one groaning under the strain of a solid one hundred and ninety-seven pounds, the other silently accepting its much lighter burden, were occupied. The Englishman laughed quietly.

"Any idea where we're heading for?"

"Seoul, I reckon." Gort spoke without removing his cigarette, a habit acquired during the Second World War. It left a man's hands free for action.

"Could be," the other said in a nonchalant way. "Could be."

"Meaning?"

"I'm new here—only arrived last week. Lucky to get this old buggy going, though—took quite a while actually. Very nearly ran over you, old chap—very nearly."

"But how come you ended up in Sunchon?"

"Quite by accident, really. I was heading a convoy towards Tokchon, but about fifteen miles this side we ran into three

Russian tanks—Stalin No. 3's—what they did to us is no one's business."

"You came through O.K.?"

"Except for practically freezing to death, I did. The first shell blew me out of my wagon, and when I came to it was all over. God, old man, every time I think of it I——"

"Don't, Lieutenant."

"What?"

"Think—doesn't help any."

"You're right there—how have you chaps been faring?"

"That's an easy one to work out—last week we had the battle won. MacArthur said so, didn't he? Things looked like it too, but we were only kidding ourselves—saw Sunchon this afternoon, didn't you?"

The younger man was running both hands around the steering-wheel, yet his eyes, deadly serious now, were fixed on Gort's face.

"Trouble is our Intelligence hadn't reckoned on Communist China, old chap."

"China, and a few other things."

"For instance?"

"This show lasting until the winter, for one thing—our tanks, another."

"You really believe ours to be inferior to theirs?"

"I know they are."

"But what about your General Patton?"

"Not worth a damn against one of those Stalin No. 3's you struck near Tokchon." The speaker grunted. "Fact is, I happened to be placed in charge of a Patton only three days ago—been running round like a cornered rat ever since."

In silence Lieutenant Cartwright finished his cigarette. A product of Sandhurst, he had been trained for moments such as this—moments when you sat quietly and allowed the other fellow to do the talking. As old Colonel Holman used to say, "When you know a man has taken just about as much as he can stand, don't torment him with questions. When ready, he'll tell you what's eating him up."

The Englishman blew out a short breath when his companion shrugged and spoke:

"Until those Stalin No. 3's came along we were doing fine. Our General Pattons could take it and dish it out plenty, that's why we were so cocky when the order came to join in with our guys who were having a crack at Hill No. 8." Captain Saunders shrugged. "I took up what I considered a swell

position and started blazing away at those little white-clad monkeys hiding behind rocks. We'd been there about ten minutes when word came through that five enemy tanks were approaching. Two mediums and three heavies, they said. I swung our old girl about and covered the bend of the road. A medium came first—I could see the snow flying high from under its tracks, but before I had him in my sights our Bazookas, waiting on the slopes, started throwing big rockets into its flanks. Woosh-bang, woosh-bang, and up went the bogie wheels. It stopped and the turret gun began swinging right and left spewing out shells wildly. But within seconds the whole works went up."

Gort Saunders rubbed his cold hands together and proceeded:

"Medium No. 2 passed around the side of its stricken brother, then turned uphill towards our old girl. My first shell tore a hole right through it, the next hit the machine-gun mounting where the assistant driver sits, sending it sky-high. The turret opened and I could see men trying to get out, but when they did our tracers began to pour into them from all over the hill." The speaker laughed. "You should have seen them scrambling back, squealing like frightened pigs. A few seconds later I saw red flames through a hole our ninety-millimetre shell had made, followed by an explosion. After that I turned my attention to tank No. 3. It was coming mighty fast. I yelled to my crowd: 'We'll have a big Stalin for tea, fellers!' and started firing."

The wounded man paused to light another cigarette, muttered something under his breath, then went on speaking in that slow Southern drawl which, for the past ten minutes, had so fascinated his attentive listener:

"Once, as a kid, I attempted to cut down a tree at our place with a small tommy axe. It was a big fellow—round a hundred years old, I reckon—and after about six hours of sweating my young soul out I'd made little impression on its solid timber. A similar feeling of frustration filled my guts as I watched our shells and rockets bouncing off that Stalin No. 3. While I sat there cursing, it brushed the first disabled tank off the road, then turned on us."

Captain Saunders' voice sank to a tired whisper.

"I don't remember much of what happened—our old girl shuddered from end to end. I heard Bud Torrence scream and, on turning, noticed part of his face was missing—I didn't feel anything though. Just then nothing seemed to

matter, least of all death. Bud might have been a guy I'd never met for all I cared as, with motor roaring at full throttle, we lurched downhill."

That unemotional voice rose a tone.

"From there on everything was confused, unreal—God knows how many times we ran into mobs of Gooks—we must have killed hundreds when near noon another Stalin No. 3 got on our tail. We played hide-and-seek all through the afternoon and well into the night, but near ten o'clock this morning I shook him off and made towards Sunchon with my dead buddies."

A long minute passed before Lieutenant Cartwright stirred. He had expected Saunders to complete his story about what had happened to the tank—his reaction at arriving at Sunchon and finding it in flames—but when the taller man remained silent, he sighed and asked:

"Might be an idea if we push on, don't you think?"

"How, without lights?"

"It's not too bad now. I can see a few yards ahead and with a bit of luck that moon might do the honours."

"Bit of an optimist, mister, aren't you?"

A motor, roaring into life, answered. They were crawling along in low gear before Cartwright spoke again:

"How's your shoulder feeling?"

"Still bleeding, but the pain's eased a bit."

"Good show! If it gets too bad you've only got to say so."

For the next twenty minutes both men were silent, their faithful little jeep ploughed on through a thick blanket of snow to the accompaniment of its healthy-sounding motor and chain-bound tyres.

Gort, who a few moments before had dozed off, was awakened by the Englishman's voice:

"Where do you come from, old man?"

"Kentucky—place called Two Springs."

"Way down south, eh?—Stephen Foster, and all that sort of thing."

"Anything against him?"

"Who?"

"Stephen Foster."

"Good heavens, no. Why?"

"Just thought I'd ask."

"Two Springs is quite a town, I suppose?"

"Sure is."

"Parents still alive?"

"My mother is."

"Lucky beggar!"

"What about yours?"

"Killed during the 'blitz.' "

"Too bad—any brothers or sisters?"

"Only child, unfortunately."

"Same here. Shall I light you another cigarette?"

"I'd rather not smoke now, old chap—must concentrate, you know."

"You're doing swell—climbing, aren't we?"

"Feels like it."

"Wish I could take over that wheel for a while—give you a rest."

"Don't worry, I'm wide awake."

"That's more than I am."

"Then why not try and get some sleep?"

"I will when we get over this hill—hell, man, your eyes must be tired."

"They're smarting a bit."

"Don't wonder—how far can you see ahead?"

"About three yards."

"Not enough on this grease track, is it?"

"Hardly."

"The sensible thing to do would be to wait here till daylight—what do you think?"

"Blest if I know," Lieutenant Cartwright replied after straightening out the jeep from a slight broadside. "If we go on there's a big chance of our piling up. On the other hand, we've got those damn Commos to bear in mind—they can't be too far behind."

"Any idea how long it is since we left Sunchon?"

"Strike a match and I'll tell you."

"There."

"My watch—what time does it show?"

"Four twenty-two."

"Which means we've been on the road for almost ten hours."

"Also that you've had it," Gort Saunders muttered, turning off the ignition key. "Drag on your brakes, soldier, and get some shut-eye—we're staying here till morning."

CHAPTER II

DAWN was breaking as an ugly little brown man, dressed in the fashion of a Korean peasant, slid from under his dirty ground-sheet and stretched himself.

Yes, he told himself, he had been lucky to find this cave last night. He'd stumbled upon it quite by chance, and after lighting a fire had sat for hours smoking that packet of cigarettes given to him by a young American serviceman only a few hours before.

Kapeeta laughed softly as he stepped from the cave's narrow opening. Life had taken on a new meaning for him over the last three months. Once it had been so dull, working from morning till night with his father and two older-brothers in Lee Fan's paddy-field for a mere pittance. But those days were over now. He was a Communist. The very thought made his narrow chest swell with pride. He didn't quite understand what Communism stood for, but it sounded good, and he knew it was right. Hadn't Chuping read him those pamphlets?

Kapeeta's thin lips framed a knowing grin. The Americans were very smart—had convinced thousands of his people to join them in this so-called battle of liberation, but thanks to those pamphlets and several lectures he had attended he knew their game.

"With South Korea free of the capitalistic swine which tonight are sweeping across our beloved country, plundering, raping and killing," Chyping had said to him, "every man, woman and child who plays a rightful part shall be rewarded most generously. Big landowners, who for years have lived from the sweat of your toil, are to be liquidated, their assets divided among members of the glorious Korean Communist forces. Wake up! On those tables over there are rifles and hand-grenades. They are yours. Harass and kill those cursed Americans who are threatening your brave new world."

Kapeeta was still smiling as he bent down and, scooping up two handfuls of snow, rubbed it against his face. Oh, yes, he was a good actor. By day he wandered from place to place greeting every United Nations' serviceman he chanced to see

with a humble "Welcome, friend." But dusk always found him making towards that gully down there where his gun and ammunition lay concealed under a long, flat-topped rock.

Timid sunlight was caressing the snow-covered hills when Kapeeta walked away from the cave. Since awaking from his short nap he had partaken of a hurried meal—a sticky, unappetizing rice mixture carried in a small tin. This, however, he had eaten with relish, for many hours had passed since food had touched his lips.

As he slid, rather than walked, down the steep grade, Kapeeta reserved the sole use of his right arm for the safe-keeping of an almost new Russian rifle. Once during his slow descent the precious weapon had slipped from his cold fingers. On picking it up he had sat for some time, tailor-fashion, in the snow, running a dirty oil-stained rag up and down its smooth barrel with the meticulous care of a mother cleaning her child's mouth after feeding.

In Kapeeta's twenty-five years he had known only two emotions—hate and fear. His hatred had been born early when, at the tender age of six, he had been whipped repeatedly by Lee Fan, who, for some unknown reason, had taken an intense dislike to the frail, under-nourished little boy he had often found sleeping instead of working in the paddy-fields.

His fear had sprung from much the same source. A lowly peasant by birth, one of three sons, his whole existence had been fraught with uncertainty—fear of hunger—tomorrow—his master, and cruel, half-witted parents. But fate had decreed that Kapeeta's destiny should not be altogether devoid of love. Had come that moment when he had strolled across to a table stacked high with rifles. His fingers had trembled as they reached upward to claim the nearest weapon. A hitherto unknown emotion, overwhelming in its power, had surged into Kapeeta's heart as he hurried from the hall. Since then this detestable little man had roamed the hills after dusk with the only thing he cherished in life held in the crook of his thin right arm.

It was near six o'clock when he reached the flat-topped rock. This morning however, instead of scooping aside the snow which covered it, he stood very still, staring across the gully. For weeks killing those cursed Americans had been his business, but now memories of other days were welling up into the man's cunning brain—memories of Lee Fan's beatings—of tender skin breaking under the lash of a leather-plaited whip. Suddenly Kapeeta turned about and, chuckling

to himself, made off towards a hill opposite to the one where he had camped the night before.

Delicate fingers entwined, heavy-hooded lids half-closed, Lee Fan sat on the veranda of his home listening to the rhythmic click, click of a rocking-chair grating against the hard mud floor. A huge man up till a few years ago, he was now only a shadow of his former self. A goitre of incredible size showed between the folds of a thick grey blanket draped across the old man's bowed shoulders. His wrinkled face, touched by warm sunlight, was drawn, the sagging lips livid, yet Lee Fan's dark eyes, despite their sunken sockets, still expressed their owner's determination to live.

Proud of his ancestry, he loved every inch of those fields which stretched from his front door to the white-mantled hills. For three hundred years they had served his ancestors well, provided them with the few luxuries of those primitive times and later given him power, wealth and a place among the gentry. Lee Fan sighed. But why think of the old Korea? Was it not like an almost forgotten dream?—now he was weak, his once-powerful body heavy with sickness, his lands in jeopardy because of the retreat of the United Nations' Forces.

Six weeks ago he had sat in this very chair watching a long procession of vehicles and men moving along yonder road, had felt secure for the first time in months. The dying man's hands were lifted in a gesture of helplessness. Oh, yes, he'd heard rumours about the collapse, heard also about the Chinese Communists pouring over the Manchurian border, but he had not been dismayed. Those thousands of khaki-clad young men he had seen streaming past would prove more than a match for them. Hadn't they saved his land, pushed the enemy back, chased the vermin right into North Korea? Why this retreat, though? Surely—— Lee Fan's slumped figure straightened slightly as a boyish figure moved into the range of his fading sight.

Kapeeta had almost reached him when the old man spoke:

"Pray lower your rifle, my son; no harm can come to you here."

The visitor laughed.

"You do not know me, eh?"

"Should I?" the other muttered, drawing back his white head. "Yes, yes, I see you more clearly now. What is your name?"

"All in good time," Kapeeta returned, spitting contemptuously across the veranda. "Where are your servants? Once there were so many—remember?"

Lee Fan smiled sadly.

"These days, my son, one can't place any reliance either on rumours or on servants. A week ago I had five, this morning but one remains, for, like myself, Ah Ling is too old to flee from the forces of evil which threaten our land."

That ugly, toothless grin on Kapeeta's face widened, stretched almost from ear to ear.

"You do not speak wisely, Lee Fan. What if I should be a Communist?"

The old Korean again set his chair in motion. Intuition told him he had something to fear from this stranger; but having had complete authority over men for well-nigh all his life, he was not afraid. If anything he rather welcomed the presence of this uncouth intruder. Their verbal encounter made him forget, if only momentarily, that awful pain in his throat. Obviously the fellow was a peasant, his clothes and—

Kapeeta spoke:

"You would have things go on as they used to be, eh?"

"Why not, my son?"

"You once had strong wrists, Lee Fan."

"That is so."

"And much land?"

"It is still mine."

"For a few days—then do you know what's going to happen?"

"Well?"

"All this," Kapeeta took in all four horizons with a sweep of his hand, "will be under the control of our Communist forces. Sit there and shake your silly head, but it's true, quite true."

Lee Fan bent his wasting body forward. A year ago he would have risen and struck the young traitor down, but this morning he was incapable of lifting anything beyond his voice, and even it trembled.

"You are young, and do not understand, my son. Promises are easily made, and just as easily broken. It is very simple to wave a golden crown before a baby's eyes and say, 'Rise from your cot and you can have it.' " The speaker shrugged. "The ears of youth listen to much nonsense. The Communists tell you, 'Destroy everyone who does not like our politics, and

we shall give you security, help you produce, stuff your pockets full of money.' Mere words, my son, mere words."

Kapeeta ran five caressing fingers along the rifle barrel, but his amused eyes did not shift from Lee Fan's goitre. It fascinated him.

"What have you to lose?" he asked, moving up the snow-covered steps. "Soon you will be dead and know nothing. Sad, is it not, that my memory is good? I carry many scars. This one across my shoulder—can you see it?"

The old man sat well back in his chair.

"What do you want of me, my son?" he muttered. "What do you want?"

"Haven't you already guessed?"

"Is it money?"

"No."

"Food?"

"That I can get for the taking." Kapeeta's voice dropped quickly. "Still don't remember me, do you?"

"No, my son, I don't."

"Yet for years I worked out there on your fields—so did my mother, father and brothers."

"Indeed?" Lee Fan was leaning forward again. "Your name? Pray tell me?"

"Kapeeta . . ."

"Ah—it was a long time ago. But you, father, yes, I do remember—he was a good worker."

The Communist smiled and lit a cigarette. It was great fun standing there in the warm sun waiting for Lee Fan to start pleading for mercy. Where would he shoot him? No, not in the heart, that was too quick. Why not finish his cigarette, then decide?

"You gave me many beatings," he said presently. "When I was a little boy you found me one day asleep in the paddy-fields. I remember being tied to a post and thrashed till everything went black—true, isn't it?"

The old Korean's moist hands were gripped about the chair's arm-rest. His voice, however, did not lift or fall:

"Often I had occasion to administer beatings. I paid my servants to work, not sleep, and some of you were very lazy boys—impertinent, too."

"I can still see you," the other went on in the quiet tones of a man whose nerves are tuned to kill, "strutting about with a whip tied to your wrist. We trembled every time our big lord and master passed."



"You have a long memory, my son."

"Also a steady hand."

"I do not understand."

Kapeeta drew the last mouthful of smoke from his cigarette, then flicked it over the veranda, saying:

"That thing on your neck—what is it?"

A slight flush spread over Lee Fan's prominent cheek-bones, and his dark eyes flashed with anger.

"Is it not humiliating enough to be so disfigured? I beg of you to leave me now; I'm tired and full of sickness."

"Not before I'm ready. But sit tight, there's plenty of time."

Lee Fan did not stir. He had an idea that the young hoodlum might ransack his house before paying any further attention to him; yet, judged by those footsteps, the sharp crunch of snow pressed underfoot, his tormentor was moving towards the hills. The ignorant fool, was it possible that men like Kapeeta would one day control the world? Oh, yes, the old order of things left much to be desired—had its grave faults, too few with so much, so many with too little; but, given time, this problem could have been solved. Take his own case, for instance: twenty years ago he had been a hard man, used his whip at the slightest provocation. What a difference today, eh! For almost two decades his employees had been well paid and housed, not to mention receiving a generous bonus at the end of the rice harvest. Yet many were disgruntled. Communists, probably, who, at this very moment, were fighting for— His long fingers curled about the arm-rest, tightened as a mocking voice called:

"Are you ready?"

Lee Fan drew the blanket closer around his rigid shoulders. He felt strangely calm—calm and very superior to that heap of dirt out there.

"Ready for what, my son?"

"To die—where do you want it?"

"Are you a good marksman?"

"There's none better in Korea."

"Then—here."

The young Communist laughed outright when his intended victim indicated a spot between the eyes. Damned old fool should have known he was only kidding. That big bag of flesh hanging from his neck had been selected for the target ten minutes ago.

Kapeeta was very pleased with himself, as carrying a bag of food pillaged from the late Lee Fan's house, he made off across the snow. After disposing of his ex-employer he had made a thorough inspection of every room, and now, with his belly full, pockets bulging with loot and snow-shoes on his bare feet, he glided, not without a certain grace, towards the hills.

His conscience was not in the least troubled by the cold-blooded murder of Lee Fan. In fact, while moving across the veranda on his way out, he had remembered that huge ring the old man always wore. When it proved obstinate, refused to slip over a joint swollen with arthritis, he had taken out his pocket-knife and performed a crude job of dissection.

He laughed heartily as his stolen shoes made light work of the snow. Since a lad he had always longed for such simple luxuries, but until this morning only those fashioned by his unskilled hands had served to make travel in bitter Korean winter tolerable.

War, how wonderful it was! he soliloquized while sliding down a slight incline. Five months ago he had been just another peasant, one of millions who went unnoticed; not so now, however—today he was a fellow to be reckoned with.

Yes, indeed, Kapeeta was a happy man this morning. The sun, exceptionally warm for November, had extracted a heavy mist from the snow and he was alone, alone in this white wilderness where the trees stood out like bleached skeletons.

On reaching the hilltop he halted. Tired after the long climb, he leaned heavily on his alpenstock, gazing back along the herringbone tracks of his ascent. They reminded him of a gigantic snake's spinal cord after its flesh had been eaten clean by ants.

The thought pleased, for he smiled and, thrusting the stock deeper into the snow, began rummaging in his pocket in the hope of finding a cigarette. Disappointed, he frowned like a spoiled child, then sat down with his alert eyes fixed on the gully. Not much sense in masquerading as a friendly peasant today, he mused. The mass American retreat had ended, and any stragglers would prove good game. Didn't look very hopeful, though. Nothing moved down there along the road, yet you could never tell what might happen. He'd wait here for a while, just in case. His fingers simply itched to squeeze the trigger of the rifle slung across his shoulders.

It was after nine o'clock before Captain Saunders shook the sleep from his eyes.

"Hey!" he muttered, gripping his companion's arm. "Wake up, soldier—it's morning."

Lieutenant Cartwright lifted a throbbing head from the steering-wheel. He gave a long yawn before asking:

"What's the time, old man?"

"Nine-twenty—let's scoot."

"Good God!"

Gort waited for the motor to turn over. It coughed several times, then gave a healthy roar as carburettor, plugs and pistons co-ordinated.

"I think we're on the right road," he said as the jeep skidded forward. "I remember that house down in the valley. On the morning we left Seoul the old guy who lives there was carried up here by his servants. They gave us quite a welcome—wonder what he's thinking now?"

"Whatever it is I'll wager it's far from complimentary."

"Yeah, like a few million others." The voice, vibrant with bitterness, made the younger man glance quickly to his right. He winced on noticing a wide patch of congealed blood on his companion's tunic.

"You're hurt badly," he muttered with rising anxiety. "How about my trying to do something about that wound of yours?"

"I'll wait. Just keep this old crate going, Lieutenant."

"Whatever you say, sir."

"Why the 'sir,' soldier?"

"Because I didn't realize until a moment ago that you're a captain—terribly sorry for calling you 'old man,' sir."

"As a matter of fact I rather like it—what's your Christian name?"

"Richard."

"Swell."

Their jeep was rounding a hairpin bend as Gort asked:

"You've a girl friend back home, I suppose?"

"Rather—I'll show you her picture when we reach Seoul. Margaret's a really grand little person—deuced pretty, too."

"Engaged?"

"Not yet. Her old boy insists on our waiting till she's twenty-one—awfully damn silly, don't you think?"

"Wise man."

"That's very unsporting of you," the other challenged behind a breezy laugh. "Personally, I'm all for giving young people a break. Provided they love each other, of course."

"Love, huh?" The wounded man's tone was crisp and hard.

"I was a sucker once myself. Carried a photograph about, too."

Blue and grey eyes met.

"Meaning?"

"Well, things didn't work out—catch on?"

"I'm beginning to—didn't play the game, eh?"

"Right first go."

"Would you care to tell me what happened?"

"Some other time," Captain Saunders said, pressing a hand against his wound. "Not in the mood just now—my shoulder's too bloody sore."

.

Kapeeta was about to start off on the long descent into the gully when his keen ears detected the low whine of a labouring motor. Instinctively the man crouched, unslinging his rifle in the same movement, then stared northward towards where, a hundred feet below, the pattern of a road was etched through gleaming white snow.

His lucky day, eh! There was only one vehicle by the sound down there, travelling slowly too—most likely an ambulance loaded with American wounded. Kapeeta pressed his thick lips together in a quick expectant movement. Well, he wouldn't have long to wait—the wagon, or whatever it was, would be rounding that bend any minute.

.

Stirred, obviously, by pleasant thoughts, Lieutenant Cartwright was smiling boyishly as the jeep, slipping and sliding, neared the hilltop. He was thinking of Margaret and the last night they'd spent together. Full moonlight—the drooping leafy arms of a huge willow under which their canoe floated, now perfectly still, now rising and falling in the backwash of larger craft. This scene and the memory of Margaret's sweet soprano voice singing *I Told Them all About You* filled the young man's mind as he drove on through the brilliant morning.

Occasionally he glanced towards his companion who slumped like a dying person beside him; but over the past five minutes the other's pain and ghastly white face had seemed somehow remote as Lieutenant Cartwright's thoughts carried him back—back into that warm pleasant little world where Margaret and he had loved and laughed, while listening to the voice of a great river.

Gort's mind, too, was blank. He had ceased thinking of

escape. Only pain and the shadow of great physical agony showed in his glazed grey eyes.

.

Less than thirty yards separated the jeep from Kapeeta as he lifted his rifle and took careful aim. He chuckled to himself as its driver slumped sideways, then turned his attention to the passenger who had risen and was trying desperately to gain control of the vehicle. Another shot rang out, followed by the young Communist's coarse laughter. Kapeeta was not quite sure of his tally to date—pity he couldn't count—but for every finger of his two hands many Americans had died. Still grinning, he made off down the steep grade. The squelch of melting snow under his shoes sounded like music to him.

CHAPTER IX

COLONEL BASSINGTON'S eyes hardened as, in a weary movement, he drew aside the flap of his small, yet well-equipped canvas surgery and gazed in the direction of Seoul.

A few minutes earlier he had just concluded his twenty-second operation in as many hours, and, though reputed to be one of the "impossible to ruffle" surgeons, his steel nerves had all but snapped under the ordeal of the past week. This was obvious as he stood now allowing his right leg to support the major part of its owner's two hundred and forty pounds weight.

His hand was unsteady as it reached for the half-smoked cigarette held lightly between full sensuous lips; and his face, grey with fatigue, was caught by a hundred ageing lines.

His bitterness, however, was not born of those writhing, leaping flames, or the dark pall of smoke hanging motionless as if curdled in the upper air. He heard, but seemed unmoved, as shells from British, Australian, Canadian and Dutch warships went swishing overhead. In fact, he heard only one sound—the groans of wounded men being helped or carried towards the waterfront—where evacuation had commenced three days before.

Colonel Bassington sighed while lighting another cigarette from a butt in his hand. Well, this looked like the end of the road; or was it only the beginning? Hard to tell, really. Yet if the United Nations were going to make a show of it, they'd have to hurry; drop a few atomic bombs on Communist China, and start a real war; either that or quit Korea pronto.

The surgeon frowned.

Why had their boys failed, though? He had seen them going into battle by the thousand. They'd looked "the goods." Well trained and equipped, too, if he were any judge. But for days now they'd been pouring back, broken, demoralized men. Why? What was the answer? Well, after all, that was not his worry, or—— He started when a voice behind him said:

"Excuse me, sir, but another batch has just arrived. One poor guy has a hole big as my fist——"

"Phone Major Turner," Colonel Bassington interrupted sharply. "Tell him I'm out on my feet, and can't trust myself with a knife any longer."

Corporal Hunter, a tall, thin-featured youth, lifted both hands in a helpless gesture.

"No go, sir. The Major's tent copped it properly a few minutes ago."

"You don't mean——?"

"Yes, sir—one of our own shells it was—wiped out the whole crowd."

"Including Major Turner?"

"Sorry, sir."

"God!" That was all the surgeon said, yet those lines in his tired face deepened like thirsty earth cracking under drought.

Corporal Hunter was the first to speak. This time, however, his voice sounded natural. For the moment he was not just a ranker addressing a commanding officer, but one of two men momentarily overwhelmed.

"The Major was a grand guy," he said. "We're all going to miss him round here. Sorry for breaking the news so suddenly, though."

"That's all right," the other returned quietly. "In a show like this one must expect anything to happen, but we couldn't afford to lose a surgeon with Turner's ability; anyone but him."

"You were great friends, too. Makes it a lot worse, doesn't it, sir?"

Colonel Bassington spoke from behind a smoke-cloud:

"My feelings don't matter. I was thinking more of the lives he might have saved; not only now, but in the future. He was an absolute wizard with the knife; you've seen him operate."

"I've watched him at work often enough during the past few months, sir." There was a tremor of awe in the corporal's voice. "But, knowing nothing about surgery, I couldn't appreciate that side of him like you—he sure was fast, though."

The older man nodded. Shock had steadied his nerves; drawn from his aching body its weariness; yet he realized that some time must elapse before he could return to the wounded men requiring his attention. An hour's sleep would be enough, followed by a cup of boiling-hot coffee—God, how his eyes smarted!—felt as though hot sand was embedded in their lids.

"What are you going to do about those fellows who've just arrived, sir?" he heard Corporal Hunter ask. "Some are in a pretty bad way."

The surgeon leaned back heavily against one of the supporting tent-poles, his brow furrowed like that of a man who finds it difficult to concentrate.

"I'm going to turn in for a while," he muttered at last. "Better wake me at eleven."

"But, sir——"

"You heard what I said, now get going and see what you can do for those boys—how many are there, by the way?"

"A truckload, sir."

"I asked how many?"

"Fourteen, sir."

"Right." The speaker dropped his cigarette, and after crushing the glowing end underfoot, went on: "Better give them all an injection—that'll keep them quiet for a while—got it?"

Corporal Hunter's thin face hardened. Up till a minute ago he had admired Colonel Bassington; had placed him on one of those lofty pedestals some laymen reserve for men of high professional standing, but now anger showed in the orderly's eyes. He felt like gripping the callous swine by the shoulder and shouting: "For Jesus' sake, you can't sleep while men are dying; one of those men out there has a hole in his belly as big as my fist. He'll be dead by eleven o'clock. You're tired—so what? Aren't we all? I've not hit the hay going on fifty hours, yet we're lucky. We've not been chased and shot at all the way from North Korea. Those guys struggling towards the waterfront have, though. You can see them from here—look."

Colonel Bassington spoke:

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

"I was just thinking, sir."

"About all in yourself, aren't you?"

"I'm still prepared to carry on, sir."

"Then get moving, and don't stand staring at me like that."

As the younger man hurried away, Colonel Bassington's eyes followed him. He didn't like what he'd read in Hunter's eyes. They had an accusing look; seemed to say: "I'll never forgive you for this, but——" So Turner was dead, eh? Terrible, terrible. He'd stroll over directly and have a look around. Wouldn't be much to see, though; just a hole in the ground and pieces of canvas; great loss, by heaven. Turner

had so much to offer the world; so much to live for, too. He was only a youngster really, and—— Now why had Hunter glared at him like that? If he were not so upset he'd call the fellow back—ask for an explanation, yet—— Hole as big a fist, eh? Sounded bad. Dum-dum bullet probably. The Colonel sighed. Well, perhaps he could forget sleep for a few more hours; keep going, at least till his eyes gave out.

As Colonel Bassington walked into the tent Hunter was kneeling beside a young negro whose right leg was shattered.

"Queer," the surgeon said, bending down and feeling the dark boy's feeble pulse, "half an hour ago I would have traded a few years of my life for an hour's sleep, but when you told me about poor Turner I kind of woke up—shock, I guess."

Corporal Hunter looked up quickly. As a child he had been the ugly duckling of his family, and now at twenty-two years of age there was little in his lean face to attract attention. His blue eyes were small, and too close set. His thin, almost shapeless lips showed as a straight line curved a trifle upwards at both ends. His chin was to be seen in any street—pointed, weak, without the slightest suggestion of character. These, plus a shock of unruly red hair which persisted in standing straight up on his crown, completed a somewhat unprepossessing picture. Yet, as he knelt there gazing up at the surgeon, his sharp, unattractive countenance assumed, for a few brief seconds, saint-like qualities. Those small blue eyes were full of thankfulness and something else. No, it was not the mist in which they swam, nor that faint smile dragging at the orderly's mouth. Colonel Bassington couldn't quite make out what was responsible for the sudden glow of warmth in his stomach, or what prompted him to turn his face away, but he did.

"I'm sure glad you came, sir," he heard the kneeling figure mutter; "I walked in here feeling like I had old Nick sitting right on my shoulder, but I'm O.K. now—do you know why, sir?"

But Colonel Bassington was already on the move, here bending over to inspect a wound, there cutting dirty blood-soaked garments from equally dirty bodies. Presently he gave a low whistle of dismay and addressed the orderly:

"Have you made a list of their names, Corporal?"

"All I could get, sir—that's Captain Saunders you're looking at now."

"Know anything about him?"

"No, sir, I don't."

A G.I., nursing a broken arm, spoke from the other side of the tent:

"We picked him up about ten miles the other side of Seoul, sir. Our driver had one hell of a job getting him from under a jeep—upturned in a gully it was."

"Was he alone?"

"No, sir. I remember Sergeant Plummer, that's our driver, saying something about another guy—a dead Englishman, he reckoned."

Colonel Bassington waited while a salvo of shells screamed overhead, then spoke with his habitual professional calm:

"Major Turner might have saved this poor devil, but I doubt very much if I can—get the theatre ready, Corporal."

.

The mass evacuation at Inchon was well under way before Colonel Bassington straightened from his task.

"Well, Captain," he said to the anaesthetist who stood watching their portable blood-transfusion unit, "had you been around three hours ago, I'd have assigned you to this job—how do you think he'll make out?"

Captain Rouerk, a graduate of Columbia University, shrugged:

"A fifty-fifty chance, sir; a grand piece of surgery on your part, though."

The older man growled deep down in his throat:

"From my point of view it's most unsatisfactory—you know what I had to do."

"Yes, sir, but they only gave you three hours."

"And a hell of a lot of din, Captain—I'll wager those shells were going over twenty per minute. Wonder is I didn't make a complete botch of the job—nearly did, by God."

"In the circumstances I don't think anyone could have done better, sir."

"If no complications set in I'm confident he'll live all right," Colonel Bassington replied, thrusting both arms towards an orderly, who slipped off his blood-smeared gloves, "but it's not enough—not to me, anyhow."

"Why, sir?"

"Again I say, you know what I had to do."

"Yes, but——"

"Another hour would have made all the difference; you must admit that yourself."

"We're not in America now," Captain Rouerk reminded. "This is Inchon, and if we don't get on that last boat, it'll be just too bad for the lot of us—better hurry, sir."

While washing his hands in a dish of brownish-coloured water, Colonel Bassington spoke direct to one of the stretcher-bearers who had just entered the tent.

"I'll come along with this fellow, sergeant—leave him till last."

It was a wretched day. Since early morning the U.S. hospital ship *Missouri* had been at the mercy of a hurricane which at times reached ninety miles per hour. Mountainous waves, their tops dashed into pure white foam, had made the small vessel shudder from stem to stern as if pounded by a giant fist. Sometimes the *Missouri* had wallowed in a dark valley of turbulent water; had looked so frail against those gigantic oncoming waves whose sole purpose, it seemed, was to engulf her. But, up till now, rolling, pitching and groaning, the stout little ship had come through with only two broken skylights and forty-odd terribly seasick men.

On the spray-lashed bridge Commander Jordan, attired in oilskins, was giving instructions to one of his junior officers.

"Keep her head straight into it, Lieutenant," he shouted, so as to make himself heard above the howling elements, "I'm going below with Colonel Bassington for a break—good luck."

A few minutes later as the two men entered a small comfortably furnished cabin, the Commander asked:

"How about a cup of coffee, Dick?"

The surgeon smiled and rubbed his gloved hands together.

"At this moment there's nothing I'd like better, bar, of course, a good stiff rum. Too bad you're in charge of a dry ship, isn't it, Terry?"

"Sit pat, and I might be able to oblige." Commander Jordan was slipping out of his oilskins. "I came across a bottle in one of the boys' lockers a few days ago—should have thrown it overboard and court-martialled the kid. But," he laughed quietly, "it happened to be the lad's first trip, and not knowing what we were in for I gave him another chance. Take a pew, Dick."

"Thanks—man, just listen to that wind—getting worse, by the sound of it."

"Sure does," the other agreed, moving slowly across the

cabin. "Wish to heaven we were making Frisco tonight, don't you?"

"Yes, indeed, if only for the sake of those boys along there. A few of them aren't in the race if this keeps up much longer, especially young Saunders."

"That's the guy you were so concerned about yesterday, isn't it, Dick?"

"Yeah." Colonel Bassington's eyes were still fixed on his friend's swaying figure. "I've a special interest in Saunders, as you may have guessed."

"I had." Commander Jordan was holding on to the end of his bunk with one hand and opening a small cabinet with the other. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"Didn't know he existed until three days ago."

"Then why the special interest?"

"He happens to be one of my few failures?"

"Surgically?"

"Yeah, surgically."

"Go on." The Commander had succeeded in gripping a bottle of Martinique rum and was now making back across the cabin. "What went wrong?"

"Just after I started to operate we were given orders to make ready for evacuation. They gave us three hours—I required at least four. You can guess the rest."

"Slip of your knife, eh?"

"Good heavens, no—I've been too long in the game for that; but no surgeon can be expected to expose all the workings of a man's abdomen; literally hack him to pieces and replace what's left in a few hours. It's not possible."

"Then what are you worrying about?" the other consoled, dropping into a chair. "Will you have it neat, Dick?"

"Sure."

Commander Jordan half filled two glasses of the mahogany-coloured liquid, and, handing one to his friend, said:

"Get this into you, feller, and relax, man, relax."

"Good health, Terfy."

"Cheers."

Both were silent for a time; occasionally their eyes met in that warm glance of understanding not uncommon between men who live in the shadow of war. Each knew what the other was thinking about: family, home, things big and small.

"How long have you been living in Colorado, Dick?"

The surgeon stopped twirling his glass around on the table, and smiled: "Going on fifteen years—I like it there."

"At Denver, aren't you?"

"In between wars I am—unlucky generation, aren't we?"

"Oh, I don't know—my old Dad was always saying that—reckoned we kids would reap all the benefits brewed in the scientist's kitchen. We have, in a way."

"For instance?"

"Well, radios; cars; television; and on your side penicillin, sulpha drugs, plus a lot of other things."

"So you're quite content, Terry?"

"Not by a long way, but can you tell me anyone who is?"

"I was, until this business started."

"Don't fool yourself, Dick."

"I really mean it."

"Knowing deep down in your heart we were heading for another war."

"A man can shut those things out if he wants to, Terry."

"That's the forerunner of complacency, isn't it, Dick?"

"Perhaps, but it allows one to enjoy, if only for a few years, a certain tranquillity of mind—I've always detested war."

"Same here, yet to survive we've got to fight."

"Why?"

"Well, in 1939 there was a guy called Hitler, now we've Russia hammering on our door. Simple enough, isn't it?"

Colonel Bassington appeared to give the matter some thought. He had often pondered on the same problem, but in justice to his friend he began searching for a new approach, something to hit back with. He took several quick sips from the glass before lifting his head.

"Have you ever asked yourself what's going to happen after Russia's been disposed of, Terry?"

"Sure."

"Well, go on."

"A hundred years of peace, then the real show."

"Meaning?"

"The dark races."

"So Armageddon, eh?"

"Maybe."

"That's the reason why I mentioned ours being an unfortunate generation. Give me the life your parents and mine knew any time. For, while denied a few of the conveniences we've taken for granted, they could at least look ahead without feeling sick in the stomach—right or wrong?"

The younger man laughed and reached for his friend's glass.

"Can't say you're exactly good company this afternoon, Dick—better have another drink."

"Small one, if you don't mind."

"Say when."

"Now—smoke?"

"I'll stick to my pipe—never could get any satisfaction out of those things."

Through grave eyes Colonel Bassington watched his friend ramming tobacco into a cherrywood bowl. Not till it was drawing well did he ask:

"What's your candid opinion of the Korean show, Terry?"

"That's a tough one," Commander Jordan returned, gripping the table for support as a particularly vicious wave struck his ship. "When we first landed there I was all for it. 'Good old Uncle Sam takes up the Commos' challenge' sort of thing. But, like MacArthur, I hadn't reckoned on the Chinese. Looks like our Intelligence led us up the garden path, doesn't it?"

"Letting MacArthur off rather lightly, aren't you, Terry?"

"Maybe. Yet if the old man's past record means anything, he should weather this storm—or will he?"

"I doubt that very much." The speaker's voice held just a suggestion of bitterness. "Of course, no general can win a war if his troops are outnumbered by ten to one. Then again, we must wait and see who really talked us into this dilemma. Was it on MacArthur's say-so, or the President's hope of building up prestige in the Far East? Could be a mixture of both, I guess. But"—Colonel Bassington sighed—"whatever the outcome, two tragic facts can't be ignored. The first is, we've blundered badly; done irreparable damage to the cause on which the United Nations was founded. And, secondly, there's the needless slaughter of young American kids—someone must answer for them, by God."

"But do you think our casualties have been really heavy, Dick?"

"Certain of it. Would have been a damn sight worse, too, only for our air superiority—those Aussie Mustang pilots did a wonderful job."

"You can't tell me anything about the men from down-under," Commander Jordan said. "During the Nipponese war we had a couple of their corvettes attached to our Task Force: They've got what it takes all right."

The surgeon grunted his displeasure. He was in no mood to discuss the merit of any particular ally. They were mere token forces, anyway, a mere drop in the ocean, and much as he admired what the Aussies, English, Canadians and Turks were doing, the matter under discussion involved only America—its foreign policy, and what had gone wrong in Korea.

"Looks as though we're going to pull out altogether, doesn't it?" he asked, after drawing noisily at his cigarette.

A hard grin spread across the younger man's weather-beaten face.

"Know what I'd do if I had my way, Dick?"

"No idea."

"Well, I'd say to the Chinese, 'Get back into Manchuria by such and such a date, or else——'"

"Atom bombs, eh?"

"Correct—why not?"

"And let the Kremlin crowd laugh like hell?"

"Our worries—one way of getting this war over, isn't it?"

"You're overlooking a very important point, though."

"Which is?"

"We'd be doing exactly what Russia wants us to do."

"So what?"

"Bad strategy, isn't it?"

"Why? When we're virtually at war with Russia now?"

"But we can't defeat her alone, Terry, nor, at this juncture, can we afford to offend other nations. India and South Africa, to name but two—countries where the coloured races far exceed the whites in number—get what I'm driving at?"

"I've thought of that one, too, Dick." Commander Jordan was still grinning. "But I'm sticking to my guns. We'd have the Chinese against us anyway, and as for India, she's bound to remain strictly neutral during the next show. Therefore the question is, do we remain in Korea, or drop some atom bombs? Which way do you want it, Dick?"

"I'm in favour of what we're doing now."

"You mean evacuating?"

"Yes."

"On the contrary, I'm certain we intend staying."

"Nonsense!"

"We'll wait and see—here, let me pour you another drink."

"Not now, Terry," the surgeon declined, rising. "I'm going along to give Saunders another injection—see you later."

As was his custom, Colonel Bassington kept his gaze fixed straight ahead as he walked quickly between those long rows of cots which covered almost the complete length of "D" deck. He felt the eyes of men on him; some friendly, others resentful; a few just following his tall figure for the want of something better to do.

A warm-hearted man despite his calling, he had adhered to this policy of impartiality since that dreadful day when thousands of young Americans had waded ashore at Okinawa to be mown down by the guns of Nippon. Up till then, he had always entered a hospital ward to greet each patient with an encouraging word, but Okinawa had put a stop to that.

His soul had been shocked by the carnage and the dumb agony of men sprawled out on beaches, waiting for the merciful hand of death to pass over their white faces. Thus he had resolved henceforward to safeguard his feelings by developing an air of professional indifference.

In this, however, he was only partially successful. For instance, every patient he knew by name registered in the colonel's mind when he passed their sick or broken bodies, and tonight they seemed to ring with particular force. Hamish Gillard, strapped to his cot, quiet as a mouse, but insane; Corporal Harris, minus both legs; poor little Croudace, blind; Sergeant Goldstein, bullet removed from his right lung last Wednesday—he'd be all right. Captain Gilchrist, badly shell-shocked, but should respond to treatment. Richard Hancock, only half a chin and one hand—land-mine, they said. The next chap—no, he didn't know the boy's name. Carried in naked—identification disc missing. Had been captured by the North Koreans—terribly mutilated. Stephen Laverick, both feet amputated—dreadful thing, frost-bite, by heaven. Corporal Ormond, bayonet wounds—gangrene to fear there. Sister Parsons, eh, a grand little person; always fussing about the men. "What was she doing now? No, he wouldn't look, but by the sound of it she was reading to someone—reading or praying.

Colonel Bassington covered a good thirty yards in this manner, not seeing, yet feeling, the tragedy of men, when suddenly he halted and allowed his eyes to meet those of Gort Saunders.

"Been awake long, Captain?" he asked, easing his body gently on to the bed.

A hand which, a week ago, had been a deep tan, but was

now white as a debutante's, ran across ashen lips; a faint voice followed it:

"Couldn't say, sir—come to give me another needle, huh?"

"Not yet awhile, son—feel like something to drink?"

"Sister just gave me a glass of barley water—all came up though."

"Tummy still a bit weak, eh?"

"Sir?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"What's the score?"

"You're doing fine."

"Reckon I'll make it?"

"Wouldn't like to bet me on it, would you, soldier?"

"No, I was just wondering—how's the war going, sir?"

"At the moment, not very well, but practically all the wounded were evacuated from Inchon."

"Fine—no idea what happened to my buddy, I suppose?"

"Which one, son?"

"The guy who was driving."

"I wouldn't know." Colonel Bassington was busy checking his patient's pulse, and did not look up. "Where'd you cop that one in the stomach, Captain?"

The wounded man gave a low cough, winced with pain, then spoke slowly:

"Don't remember much about it. The little Englishman and I were in a jeep heading towards Seoul when I heard him mutter: 'Oh, I say,' and slump over the wheel. Everything went kinda blank after that."

"A sniper, obviously." The surgeon was making a few notes on the chart. "The swine used a dum-dum bullet, too, worse luck."

"No!"

Colonel Bassington noticed sweat clinging to the corners of his patient's mouth when after the fourth attempt Gort asked:

"Low—low down, sir?"

"Too low—ripped you wide open."

"That could mean a lot of things, Colonel."

"It does."

"And—where do I go from here?"

"You'll get along O.K.—married?"

"I nearly was—once."

"But now?"

"Invulnerable, sir—to women."

"Then you'd better stay that way."

"Intend to."

"Any parents?"

"Only Mother."

"Father dead, eh?"

"Killed in an auto crash—fifteen years ago."

"Too bad—mind if I ask you a personal question, Captain?"

"Not at all."

"Good." Colonel Bassington rose and with both hands dug deeply into his trouser pockets, stood gazing down at that young giant who'd be little better than a semi-invalid in the future. When he spoke, the surgeon's voice was a trifle unsteady.

"How are you two situated financially?"

"We've always managed all right, sir." The speaker's grey eyes were trying to smile. "Dad left us pretty well provided for. We have our own house, and Mother receives a decent-sized cheque from the Fourth National Insurance Company each month—more than enough for her needs."

"And what about you?"

"Guess that depends on what the Chinese have in mind."

"Afraid not," Colonel Bassington said, lighting two cigarettes, and placing one between the wounded man's lips. "Take it quietly, son—short easy puffs."

"Thanks, sir—but what were you about to tell me?"

The surgeon picked up a hypodermic needle from a tray, studied it for a moment, then without further ado, thrust its point into Gort's left arm. He waited a few seconds for the drug to reach his patient's blood-stream; satisfied, he began dabbing the punctured skin with cotton-wool.

"I had one of the best gun-dogs in Colorado until two years ago, Captain," he said presently. "Max could scent out a quail or pheasant, and, darn it all, man, you couldn't see a muscle twitch in his sleek body." The voice dropped suddenly. "Queer what happened, though."

"Someone poisoned him, sir?"

"Almost as bad—while climbing through a hedge one afternoon, I stumbled and my gun blew off his right leg."

The surgeon's eyes held his patient's as he proceeded: "Max is still at home, but we don't go hunting any more, Captain—I lost all love for the sport after that."

The younger man did not comment; he wanted to say: "Hard luck, sir," but that wound in his stomach was giving him hell. From afar he heard the other speak:

"This might sound a pretty crude way of putting it, son, but when it's all said and done, dog and man are closely allied. Loyalty, after all, can't be bought, not even with our mighty dollar; it must be won by kindness, and there's hardly a mortal living who, at one stage of his life, hasn't given part of his heart to a canine friend." The speaker bent down, and slipping the partly smoked cigarette from his patient's white fingers, resumed: "Max was like that to me. I had my family, of course; loved every hair in their heads, so to speak, but when a man's a hunter his life isn't complete without a dog—that's why the old fellow and I had so much in common. During weekends we used to roam for miles over wind-swept fields, Max's nose skimming the grass, I following with gun cocked, eyes never leaving his brown-spotted rump." Colonel Bassington smiled sadly. "Then suddenly all those exciting adventures we shared were over, Captain; these days Max is to be seen limping about our garden. As for my gun, it hangs, like some forlorn thing, in the lumber-room. But the point I'm trying to make is this, son: had I taken a little more time in getting through that hedge, everything would have been O.K.—life's just a series of 'ifs,' isn't it?"

"That's so." Gort's voice sounded thick, and every few seconds his heavy eyelids flickered, half-closed. "Some storm, eh, sir?"

"Been blowing all day, son."

"When do we hit Frisco, sir?"

"Monday some time."

"Then what happens—to me, I mean?"

"You'll be taken straight to hospital."

"Where?"

"Probably Los Angeles."

"Trying to make a film star out of me, are you, sir?"

"Maybe you've got something there."

"Don't bother, I've got to kill some more Commos first—even up the score for those buddies of mine."

Colonel Bassington glanced towards Sister Parsons, who was approaching the bed. She carried a hot-water bag; pastel-blue, it matched the colour of her tear-laden eyes. Queer, but he hadn't noticed how pretty she was before; reminded him in a way of—

Gort Saunders spoke:

"Ever been inside a General Patton tank, sir?"

"No, no, I haven't—seen plenty, of course."

"That's as close as you ever want to get."

"Bit grim, eh?"

"Sure—dead men don't have much to say, they just stare, but you know all about that, don't you, sir?"

"I've seen more than my share, Captain."

"Mine was a swell team; the finest bunch of guys I've ever met. That's why I've got to kill me another few Commos."

"I say, son?"

"Yes, sir?"

"You won't be going back to Korea."

"Must—told you why, didn't I?"

Colonel Bassington lifted the blankets for Sister Parsons; he was thankful for the interruption—it gave him time to pull himself together. Without speaking, she placed the water-bag on Gort's stomach, and was hurrying away towards a violently sea-sick man before the surgeon found his voice.

"I'm recommending you for a full military pension, Captain," he said. "Meanwhile, I'll do everything possible to get you on your feet."

Gort lay for a long time staring up at the white ceiling; he heard voices. Sister Parsons' was low, pleading; the other was harsh, guttural, like a man in the grip of death. Strange, but he didn't feel sleepy any more; must have been a weak shot the old fellow had given him, otherwise he'd have been off long ago. Swell guy, Colonel Bassington. Looked quite upset when he told that story about his dog. "Gun hanging like a forlorn thing in the lumber-room. Max hopping about on——" So he wouldn't be going back to Korea? Not much; take more than a bullet in the belly to stop him. Full military pension, eh? Made him want to laugh. "Do everything possible to get you on your feet." Now there was a funny one. Fancy saying—— He felt a cool hand on his forehead, and finally succeeded in focusing his glazed eyes on Sister Parsons' face. Her voice barely reached him.

"I wouldn't have believed it of you, Captain. Such language, my ears are still burning—really they are."

Gort Saunders shook his throbbing head from side to side. Tomorrow he would challenge that statement, tell her it was not his habit to cuss in a woman's presence, but he was too darn tired. Nice eyes she had, though—very nice.

CHAPTER IV

HE sat in a wheel-chair on the veranda of the General Eisenhower Hospital in Los Angeles trying to interest himself in one of the half a dozen magazines his mother had brought him during her visit last week. It was a pleasant morning; the breeze, though cool, lacked any suggestion of violence and all day old Sol had been riding high, wide and handsome in a clear blue sky.

The hospital, a striking example of modern architecture, was of cream brick. Curved glass-enclosed verandas swept along the complete length of its ten stories, girdled below by a beautifully laid-out garden and a maze of flower-bordered paths.

From the seventh floor there was much to see. The gentle rolling hills with their patchwork of delightful homes; the broad tree-lined avenues pock-marked by cars and a strange variety of brightly coloured buses; the people: soldiers, nurses and civilians who walked, sauntered or sat in the hospital grounds.

All these had interested Gort Saunders until a few hours ago, but not now. Inside of him the cruel teeth of bitterness were gnawing, for just after morning tea a young private he knew by sight had hobbled over to him on crutches and said:

"Looks like we've gone through the 'stop-light' signal, don't it, sir?"

Gort had kept his gaze from that short stump showing below Private Clark's left thigh as he replied:

"I aim on having another fling yet, soldier—should be up and about any day now—how are you making out?"

The other had rolled a ball of chewing-gum from one side of his mouth to the other, then laughed.

"We ain't in the race, sir. What with these crutches and your walking-sticks, it's curtains for us—not much good kidding ourselves, huh?"

"Perhaps you're right," Gort had muttered, sitting up stiffly in his chair, "but when did you hear all about me?"

"Not ten minutes ago—that little cutie, Nurse Gilroy, and her sister were talking, see. Apparently didn't notice me

getting a packet of smokes from my locker, then suddenly cutie ups and says: 'Sad about Captain Saunders, ain't it?' and her sister asked kinda startled-like: 'What happened and——' " Here Private Clark had looked his superior officer square in the eyes. "Not talking out of turn, am I, sir?"

"Not at all, I've known all along—go on."

"Swell; thought for a time I'd put my foot right in it," the other had replied, chewing thoughtfully at his gum. "But anyway I wouldn't mind swapping these crutches for your sticks—sort of more dignified, ain't they?"

Gort took a long time in lighting a cigarette. He was thinking hard, thinking about a host of unpleasant things, when he asked:

"Did Sister explain why I'd be using walking-sticks, soldier?"

"Yeah, it appears little cutie was in the theatre yesterday when your last 'ray' plates were handed to Colonel Bassington. She said he took one look and handed them to Major Collis, saying: 'Just as I feared; there's nothing we can do. If I dared to operate on Saunders again, his stomach would fall apart!'"

Gort had no idea what happened after that. He didn't hear Private Clark saying: "Guess we can take it, eh, sir?" before hobbling away, or Nurse Mansell's bright "Good morning" when she'd come to collect his cup and saucer. For over an hour he'd just sat like a dead man in the wheel-chair, staring into space.

Sister Gilroy's voice had awakened him from his gloomy reverie. While passing through the ward she had paused, placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and said:

"We've some turkey for dinner, Captain; hope you feel hungry."

He had muttered something about being a bit squeamish, then in the endeavour to hide his confusion had requested her to pass over one of the magazines.

That had been a good forty minutes ago, yet even now his trembling hands were turning over clusters of unread pages, and a voice deep down inside the man was whispering: "Oh, Jesus! Oh, Jesus!"

Dinner was about to be served when Colonel Bassington appeared on the veranda. Noticing his favourite patient sitting alone near one of the open windows, he took up a chair and, after sitting opposite the motionless figure, spoke:

"This is the weather we like, isn't it, son?"

Gort's eyes did not rise from the coloured magazine-cover resting on his knees.

"Yeah," he murmured, "yeah."

"Doing a spot of reading, I see."

"Kind of."

"What's the story?"

"Alice in Wonderland."

The older man frowned. Something had happened to Captain Saunders. It was not like him to be sullen, let alone discourteous, but he'd give the lad another chance before pulling him up "quick-smart." Damn it all, that curly bit of sarcasm was quite uncalled-for. After all, he had denied himself of a few extra days with his family in the hope of being able to perform another operation. Saunders knew nothing about that, of course, yet—

"Very interesting yarn," he heard Gort saying. "You should read it one day."

"What's on your mind, son?"

"Alice in Wonderland—like a few surgeons I know—she had a terrific imagination."

"Captain?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I don't like your tone."

The younger man's eyes were lifted. They were cold, yet in them somewhere a grim humour lurked.

"There are some things I don't like myself, either, sir."

"For instance?"

"Being taken for a sucker."

"I don't follow you, son."

"Kept telling me I'd be O.K., didn't you?"

"Well?"

"Just as I said, I don't like being taken for a sucker."

Colonel Bassington withdrew his cigarettes and held the packet forward.

"Here, have one of these."

"No thanks."

"Can I borrow your lighter?"

"Sure."

"Fine!" The surgeon had inhaled and expelled three mouthfuls of smoke before his eyes returned to his patient's.

"Who have you been talking to, son?"

"Does that matter?"

"Very much."

"Then I'm not saying."

"Was it one of the nurses?"

"No."

"Better come clean, Captain."

"Said I'm not talking, didn't I?"

Colonel Bassington fidgeted about in the chair. He was angry. A hot flush showed around his cheek-bones, and every few seconds his hands closed in a quick, crushing movement. So something had leaked out, eh? But how? He had been particularly careful not to discuss this case with anyone outside the medical staff, yet obviously Saunders knew about those last X-rays. Now, exactly what had occurred in the theatre? Yes, he'd handed the plates to—by heaven, that was where it must have happened! One of the nurses had overheard his remark about not daring to—

Gort was speaking:

"When you mentioned recommending me for a full pension, I didn't get it, but everything's clear to me now."

"Just how much do you know, son?"

"Plenty."

"Well, come on—come on."

"Why ask me—you're the doctor, aren't you?"

"I've tried to be a little more than that, Captain."

The wounded man's lips distorted themselves.

"Guess you're right there, too," he said. "I'm sorry, sir."

"We'll forget all about it," Colonel Bassington muttered, leaning forward. "But how about telling me who talked to you?"

"What good would it do?"

"I'd like very much to know, nevertheless."

"I don't do that sort of thing, sir—would you?"

"Probably not," the other admitted grudgingly, "but you've not answered my second question yet."

"About what?"

"How much you know."

Gort Saunders' laugh was not pleasant to hear, nor was the voice which followed it:

"That dum-dum bullet sure made a mess of my guts, didn't it, sir?"

"'Fraid so."

"Too scared to operate again, aren't you?"

"A conscientious surgeon does not attempt what he believes to be impossible—all of us have limitations, you know."

The patient hesitated some seconds before asking:

"Let's assume you did operate and I came through, would I be able to get along without depending on walking-sticks, sir?"

"The chances are about a hundred to one against, son."

"But if you're willing to have a shot at it, I am. I've been far too active and——"

"I appreciate all that, Captain, yet——"

"You refuse to try?"

"I'm a surgeon, not a butcher."

"Oh!" Gort pushed his body well back into the chair.

"When Mother was here, did you speak to her?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Gave her the whole works, eh?"

"Only what I feared. At the time, however, I did hold out some hope which, since then, has faded."

"Then the position is?"

"You'll be discharged in about three weeks."

"Complete with walking-sticks and all, huh?"

"Not so fast—crutches for a start."

"How long?"

"Until those torn sinews in your tummy have had time to knit."

"Which should take——?"

"Depends on you, son. Given a chance, they might be O.K. within a month."

"Then what, sir?"

"You'll be able to take a stroll."

"On sticks?"

"Correct."

A mirthless smile spread over Captain Saunders' lips, but beyond a low hissing sound he gave no indication of his feelings. Colonel Bassington sat very straight, too. "Well, thank God that's over," he was thinking. "Now for the bomb-shell. Better give it to him while he's in the mood." He shrugged, and lit another cigarette.

"I'll not be seeing you again," he said presently. "I've orders to be ready by six in the morning."

The patient's senses worked slowly. It took some seconds for the colonel's words to penetrate his bewildered mind. When at last they did, he looked up quickly.

"Where—where are you off to this time, sir?"

"Korea again, worse luck."

"So we're going to make a real fight of it after all, eh?"

"Uncle Sam takes some licking when he gets really mad, Captain."

"Darn right he does." The speaker's eyes were aglow for the first time in hours. "Sure will miss not having you around, though—I really mean that, sir."

Colonel Bassington's chuckle lacked heart.

"Nice to hear you say so, son. We've seen quite a lot of one another lately, haven't we?"

"And now it's all over, eh?"

"Unless you happen to be in Colorado one day. We live in Denver, 47 Livingstone Avenue. I'll always be glad to see you."

"Thanks a lot."

"It's a promise?"

"Yes, sir—let's shake on it."

Two hands closed in a firm, warm grip, then the older man stood looking down into that pain-drawn face with an expression in his own which could have been tenderness, pity or regret. Suddenly he squared his shoulders.

"I'm going to hit you pretty hard now, Captain, right under the belt as a matter of fact, but I hate doing it, believe me—hate it like hell."

Gort's lips caught at both corners, yet the smile riding his eyes remained.

"You've—you've something else to tell me, sir?"

"Hm, hm."

"O.K.—I'm ready."

The surgeon was dabbing a handkerchief against his perspiring brow.

"Remember my inquiring on the ship whether or not you were married?"

"Sure, I do."

"At the time that question didn't strike you as being odd, I suppose?"

"No, sir."

"Are you fond of children, Captain?"

"Darn right—but who isn't?"

"It would make my job much easier if you weren't."

"How come?"

"Well," the speaker's voice had become a trifle husky, "Korea cost you much more than any man is prepared to give, Captain, even for his country. In short, you must forget children; they'll not be part of your world. You can marry,

of course, perform the natural functions of a husband, but that's all. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

Something seemed to fall apart in Gort Saunders. It was not courage, pride or dignity; something much more fundamental. A few words had shattered his manhood, hacked it into a thousand meaningless pieces, and, by God, he couldn't even cry.

CHAPTER V

MRS. SAUNDERS was exceptionally well-preserved for her years. Very fair and tall, her figure had not yet taken on those middle-aged lines so common among women of fifty. Her carriage was still youthful; and attired this afternoon in a faultlessly cut grey tweed suit, and small felt hat, she stood out among the crowd waiting at the Nashville aerodrome.

Since the death of her husband, Mrs. Saunders had been immune to tears. Once she might have been described as a gushing, over-demonstrative woman whose feelings could be unleashed at the slightest provocation, but with the death of the man she adored, Mrs. Saunders had changed. She rarely laughed, and when occasionally depression laid heavy hands upon her, she kept a stiff upper lip. In short, the tragedy of fifteen years ago had completely reversed the widow's personality. These days she considered it a sign of weakness to cry or betray emotion in the company of others.

In 1942 when Gort, on the last day of his final leave, had kissed her good-bye at the railway station, she had been forced to summon every atom of courage to keep back her tears; but in the anxious years that followed Mrs. Saunders' tremendous self-control had been sorely tried.

Her letters, at first almost impersonal, had taken on a wistful, imploring tone as the war news darkened. "She loved Gort very much; he was all she had. It almost broke her heart to stroll into his room and see all the little bits and pieces gathered over the years; his favourite baseball bat, football boots, those cups he had won for swimming at school. They all had a voice, begged her to have courage, to keep on believing that God in His mercy would look after her boy."

On the 17th of December, 1946, Gort, with some fifty other veterans, had returned to Nashville to be welcomed at the station by a brass band and later driven along streets lined with cheering crowds. Everyone had been excited or emotional except Mrs. Saunders. She had sat at her son's side, regal as a queen, but, to all outward appearances, quite unmoved.

The same could be said of her now as she stood behind a wire barrier watching that huge Skymaster disgorging its passengers. Her expression hardly changed when she noticed Gort being assisted down the gang-plank by an air-hostess; in fact, she was smiling when, a few minutes later, he hobbled through the turnstile, followed by Miss Toohey, who carried his small canvas zippered bag.

On seeing his mother, Gort halted and said in an embarrassed sort of way:

"Warned you about these crutches, didn't I, honey? How's tricks?"

"Everything's fine, darling," Mrs. Saunders answered, giving him a quick peck on the cheek. "But why are you so late?"

The air-hostess, an attractive young woman of twenty-four, frowned. She seemed a little bewildered by the bold greeting her ex-passenger had received. "Must be his aunt," she mused, placing the bag at Gort's feet, and speaking:

"We ran into some dirty weather over Kansas. Captain Saunders was very sick—had me quite worried for a while."

"That's most unusual for him," the mother returned without batting an eyelid. "After all, this isn't your first ride in a plane, is it, dear?"

Gort gave a hollow laugh. He had hoped his mother might be nice to Miss Toohey, but she looked so stiff and uncomplimentary standing there; seemed to resent the girl's presence.

He coughed before speaking:

"Mother, I want you to meet Miss Toohey. She's been more than just helpful to me during the trip."

The older woman nodded, muttered a frigid "How do you do?" then, taking a five-dollar bill from her purse, held it forward.

But the air-hostess flushed, and stepped back quickly.

"Please don't!" she said in a hurt voice, "I've never accepted a tip in my life. Good-bye, Captain."

Mother and son watched Miss Toohey pass through the turnstile; watched until she had re-boarded the plane. Then Mrs. Saunders picked up Gort's bag, saying:

"Come on, dear, our car's parked only a short distance from here."

He pushed the padded shoulders of his crutches under badly chafed arm-pits, and moved forward.

"You shouldn't have done that, honey."

"What, dear?"

"Offered Miss Toohey a tip."

The mother's startled gaze swept her son's face. "Oh, dear God, how ill he looked!" her thoughts screamed, yet, in answer to his reprimand, she laughed.

"Nonsense, darling; you're far too sensitive. Nowadays it's expected of one."

"Depends on the type, Mother."

In silence they reached the main street. A few passers-by looked in Gort's direction; at his new uniform with its somewhat soiled ribbons won during the Second World War. A teenager smiled encouragingly at him, but he did not even see the girl.

When only a few yards separated them from their car, a dog, as it leapt to escape the hissing wheels of a lorry, crashed against one of Gort's crutches. Mrs. Saunders gave a sharp cry of alarm; made a frantic effort to steady her son's toppling figure, but he fell heavily—fell, and lay stretched on the footpath, regarding her with a terrible appeal in his eyes.

Several men and women rushed to the mother's assistance. A big fellow in overalls bent down and, placing his hands under Gort's arms, spoke, first to Mrs. Saunders, then to the milling crowd.

"Leave him to me, lady—get to 'ell out of 'ere, will youse. Can't you see the poor guy needs some air?"

Mrs. Saunders stood very straight; her heart felt as if it would burst any second, yet she kept saying to herself: "For goodness' sake, steady yourself. This isn't the time or place for hysterics. Be calm, woman, be calm."

With an "Easy does it," the big fellow lifted Gort to his feet; held him while a young woman collected the crutches.

"There's a drug-store not far from here," she said. "Please let me go and get you a draught—you look so pale."

He smiled down at her.

"Thanks a lot, but I'm all right now—a dog knocked me right over."

"I saw the darn thing headin' straight for yer," the man in overalls put in, "but never had time to do anything. Sure you feel O.K., buddy?"

"Sure, I'm sure."

Mrs. Saunders' face was the colour of unveined marble, but by a stupendous effort of will she kept her voice at its natural pitch as she said:

"We've everything under control now, thank you."

Fortunately, my son's head didn't strike the ground. Ready, Gort? I'll keep hold of your arm—like this."

"Better if you shoo off any stray dogs," he returned, trying to laugh. "Here we go."

Watched by sympathetic eyes, they gained an old Buick. Gort opened the door for his mother, then hobbled around to the other side and after several attempts pulled himself into the seat beside her.

The car had passed through the city and was heading north along a broad concrete road before Mrs. Saunders allowed her maternal instinct to express itself.

"Forgive me for appearing so indifferent, dear," she muttered, imprisoning his left hand in her right. "When I saw you being assisted from the plane, I nearly died. Oh, Gort, if only I could cry sometimes I'd feel so much better."

His fingers responded to hers.

"There's no need to apologize, honey—or cry, for that matter. I quite understand."

She blinked the slight mist from her eyes, then threw him a tender glance.

"Most of the folk in Two Springs think I've no heart at all, but they don't know me, do they, dear?"

"I've never heard anyone say that, Mother."

"I have—Jean Bardsley told me straight out only the other night."

"Like her darned hide!"

"She didn't mean to be unkind," Mrs. Saunders returned as three heavily loaded semi-trailers appeared over the hill. "Jean was over at our place when your telegram arrived. Being old friends, I read it to her. She was so upset."

"How come?"

"Your warning me about coming home on crutches. 'Oh, Mildred,' she said, 'how can you be so self-possessed? If Gort were my son that telegram would break my heart.'"

"But didn't you explain they're only temporary, Mother?"

"Of course, but it didn't make any difference."

"Honey?"

"Yes, darling?"

"What did Colonel Bassington tell you?"

She glanced at him again, quickly, furtively.

"I don't remember mentioning that I'd spoken to the Colonel, dear."

"You didn't—but he did."

"When?"

"On the day after you left for Two Springs."

"Oh!" The voice had risen a tone. "Such a nice fellow, isn't he?"

"One of the best." Gort laughed softly. "Quit stalling, though, honey. Tell me what he said."

Mrs. Saunders' hands closed about the driving-wheel so tightly that her glove-covered knuckles stood out like small grey agates.

"Very little, really. The Colonel did mention the possibility of your having to use crutches for some time—also something about another operation. That's all, I think."

Gort watched a late-model Cadillac flash past. It was out of sight before he spoke:

"Didn't the old man say anything about a full military pension?"

"Believe he did."

"Thought so. Do you know what that means, honey?"

"I've—I've a pretty good idea, darling."

Gort made a peculiar movement with his mouth; drew the lower lip well back between his teeth, then blew it out quickly.

"I'm going to find things a bit queer for a while," he muttered at last; "probably get cranky as hell on occasions—feel like reaching up into the sky and getting God by the shoulders; ask Him, 'Why did You let this happen to me?'" The speaker shrugged. "Perhaps I'm lucky to be alive, to have you and a good home waiting for me; but when a guy's only got half a belly and two walking-sticks with which to face the future, he's apt to forget his blessings."

Mrs. Saunders pressed her foot down hard on the accelerator. She wanted to stop the car, to throw her arms around his neck and say: "Please, Gort, don't give up. Nothing in this world is quite as bad as it seems," but she couldn't utter a word nor even look his way.

The Saunders' house was a neat yet unpretentious weather-board building set in over an acre of land. Emerald green lawns, their continuity broken here and there by flower beds, stretched from fence to fence, and along the front veranda a rambling rosebush, its slender arms interlocked, served as protection against wind and rain.

"Strange, you know," Gort said, as their car turned into the

drive, "everything kinda looks different. Has the old place been painted or something?"

His mother slipped the gear into low.

"No, dear."

"Then what's happened?"

"Oh, I know. That big birch your father was so proud of—I had it cut down last month; felt so sad seeing it reduced limb by limb, but Mr. Crowley—he moved in next door six months ago—was scared stiff. Said the tree might fall on his place some day, so in the end I capitulated."

"It seems terribly bare without it, though." The man's voice held a ring of reproach. "Gosh, the games I've had under the old birch." He laughed. "Remember the day I climbed to the very top and lost my nerve? Refused to budge until you sent for the fire-brigade."

"I'll not forget it as long as I live," Mrs. Saunders answered, steering the car into the garage, "or your poor father—I can still see him standing over there saying: 'Grab that other limb, son, but be careful now, be careful.'"

"Sure wish he was around this afternoon, honey."

"So do I, dear; but wait and I'll help you out."

A few seconds later, however, as she opened the door and made as if to assist him, Gort gripped her hands.

"That's one thing you must never do, Mother. From now on I've got to get around under my own steam. Might as well start right here—understand?"

Mrs. Saunders gave a crooked smile, yet without further ado took his bag from the back seat and followed him out of the garage. They walked slowly across a lawn which, owing to recent heavy rain, was soggy underfoot. Once Gort's crutches broke through the soft surface and threatened his balance, but he dismissed the embarrassing incident with a light "Aw, shucks!" and tried to laugh it off.

They had almost reached the house when he stopped, and throwing back his head, took in three deep breaths of the keen afternoon air.

"Sure is good to smell flowers again," he said, in that low vibrant voice of a man speaking right from his heart. "Roses, isn't it?"

"Carnations, darling. We've several beds of them growing over there near the fence—see?"

His gaze followed her pointing finger, rested for some seconds on those gently swaying, pink, white and red blooms.

"They remind me of Barney Holland," he said presently, "the guy I mentioned several times in my letters. He used to compose poetry about carnations—some of it wasn't bad either."

"They've done very well this year," his mother whispered, trying to keep his mind on the flowers. "So colourful, aren't they?"

"Really beautiful." Gort's thoughts seemed far away. "If it were in my power, I'd lift this garden up by the roots and transplant it somewhere in Korea—our fellows have almost forgotten what a stretch of lawn looks like."

"Darling."

"Yes, Mother?"

"That's all over now."

"Not quite. I see carnations and remember Barney Holland. Sit on a car seat, and start thinking about guys fighting up to their knees in slush. Glimpse a city's lights from a plane, and my eyes confuse the scene; make of it a Korean outpost. I watch groups of young Americans, English, Aussies and others crouched in stinking trenches with the rain splashing against their gaunt and tired faces; I see bodies, too, hundreds of them, stretched out on the mud. In the vivid illumination of shells they all look the same, like toy soldiers thrown carelessly aside and——"

"Please, Gort, you're just home, darling."

A moment ago he had been looking right past her, but now the man's eyes returned to his mother's face.

"Sorry, honey—didn't mean to upset you."

She smiled and reached for his hand.

"Guess who's in town, Gort?"

"Not Jenny Lynne Ruston?"

"Yes—she's been through a bad time, poor thing."

His gaze was again roving the garden.

"Who told you, Mother?"

"Jenny Lynne herself. She and Amber May called last Thursday. We had afternoon tea together."

"Oh!"

"I'm really sorry for her, Gort."

"Why?"

"She's aged terribly."

"Been ill or something?"

"No."

"Then what's her trouble?"

"She married the wrong man—told me so herself."

"Then that's just too bad," he said, moving forward, "just too bad."

Mrs. Saunders sighed as her son passed by. Up till 1944 everyone in Two Springs had taken it for granted that Jenny Lynne and Gort would be married if he survived the war. Sweethearts long before being sent to Duke University to complete their education, they were inseparable up to the treacherous Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. During the subsequent two years Jenny Lynne's conduct had been exemplary. Invitations to parties were declined with a wistful "No thanks, not without Gort," and every night she had written long letters to the man who, as a boy, had captured her heart.

In December of 1944, however, Major Cedric Dempsey, who, according to the local paper, was reputed to number among the most highly decorated of Uncle Sam's war-birds, had visited his aunt in Two Springs.

An unusually handsome man, with dark, melancholy eyes, brown curly hair and a shy boyish grin, he had been a little nonplussed by the sensation his presence created among the marriageable young women of the town.

In fact, it was not until the afternoon his aunt had brought this much-discussed airman to Mrs. Ruston's house, that Major Dempsey appeared to take any real interest in what was going on about him.

Unlike most girls he had met in Two Springs, Jenny Lynne hadn't fussed over him or asked a lot of stupid questions. On the contrary, she had sat quietly on her chair and hardly glanced his way.

The following day, however, when Major Dempsey noticed her in the main street, carrying a bag piled high with food-stuffs, he had approached.

"That's quite a weight you have there, Miss Ruston—do let me carry it."

For a moment it seemed she would decline his offer, but Cedric, striving hard to impress, persisted.

"Turn me down and I swear never to assist another woman. That's a threat."

She had smiled and handed him the bag, saying:

"How mean of you to be so uncompromising, Major—this way."

On reaching the car, his voice dropped to a confidential level. "Sure do feel down in the mouth this morning, Miss Ruston."

"So sorry—nothing serious, I hope."

"Terrible—guess what they've done to me?"

"What, Major?"

"I've been taken off combat duty."

She had looked up at him through eyes both grave and perplexed.

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Well, I'll not be returning to the South-West Pacific. In short, I've had my last fight and from now on will be instructing other guys—brother, am I sore?"

"In your place, I'd be relieved, really I would."

"That's because you don't know how I hate those little Japs."

"I hate them too, Major, yet if I had anything to do with the Air Force, I'd have grounded you long ago."

"Say, don't be——"

"But your luck can't hold out for ever, Major—the next sortie might have been your last."

"Maybe."

"Where will you be stationed?"

His eyes brightened at the question.

"Preston, of all places."

"You mean here—in Kentucky."

"That's right—surprised?"

"Well, yes, I am. Coincidence, isn't it?"

"Miss Ruston?"

"Well?"

"Mind if I write to you once in a while?"

"No, but I'll not promise to reply."

"I'll take a chance—so long."

Jenny Lynne had watched until his tall figure was lost in the crowd pouring out of a newsreel theatre; then, laughing in an amused way, switched on the motor.

A month later, on receiving a letter from Major Dempsey, she had not bothered to acknowledge it; but after the sixth, shame punched at her conscience, and before she realized what had happened they were corresponding regularly.

Spring was approaching when next they met. A knock on the Rustons' front door. Cedric standing there with his big grin and a bag. "Sorry to bust in on you like this," he had said. "Just couldn't wait another minute—gosh, am I pleased to see you!"

Major Dempsey's second visit to Two Springs in no way rivalled the popularity of his first. The people who knew

Gort didn't approve of Jenny going about with him. A few even went so far as to mention the matter to Mrs. Saunders, who, although concerned by this sudden turn of events, refused to be drawn into the controversy.

Ten days after the airman's arrival Jenny Lynne's parents had been shocked by a letter from Preston. This, no doubt, would distress them both, she had written. On leaving yesterday to drive their guest back to his station, marriage had not been discussed. Of course, she loved Cedric. He had appealed to her right from the start, and though she tried to be fair to Gort, it was not to be. Naturally she felt a little sad: one couldn't throw over any decent man without a feeling of regret; but she was over twenty-one and would accept full responsibility for the decision taken less than two hours ago. Yes, they had been married at a little church just out of Preston. It was all very beautiful. A white-headed preacher, his niece and a chap Cedric had known at school were the only other people present. Quite different from the grand affair she had planned. But at least they could go to bed tonight certain of one thing, that their daughter was terribly, terribly happy.

Mrs. Saunders' blue eyes were a little cold as, walking quickly to overtake her son, she moved across the lawn.

"Why did you have to mention Jenny Lynne?" her conscience whispered. "Should have known it would make Gort bitter. His first night home, too."

CHAPTER VI

ONLY the flickering flames of a dying fire illuminated the large high-ceilinged room. It was comfortably furnished; eight loose-covered lounge chairs, placed so as to assure each occupant of warmth on winter nights, were arranged artistically around a massive flagstone fireplace.

A cedar bookcase filled one of the walls, and in the right-hand corner a baby grand of rosewood gleamed brightly in the half-light. On either side of the closed French windows a pair of brass bowls filled with flowers rested on cedar pedestals; and opposite a china cabinet, its shelves packed with exquisite hand-made pottery, stood in silent homage to a forgotten art.

Since dinner Mrs. Saunders and Gort, who occupied chairs nearest the piano, had been unusually quiet. On several occasions the mother had attempted to make conversation; had touched on his boyhood and college days, their trip to Honolulu fourteen years before; but convinced at last that her son was in a sullen mood, she had endeavoured to concentrate on her croquet.

Now, however, as the little French clock on the mantelpiece neared nine o'clock, she slipped off her reading glasses, and after regarding Gort for some seconds, spoke:

"Think I'd better put on another log, don't you, dear?"

His heavy eyes came away from the fire's glowing heart and were turned in her direction.

"Not on my account, honey; I'll be making off to bed soon—feel kinda drowsy."

She smiled; and reaching out covered one of his moist hands with hers.

"So nice to have you home again, Gort—just like old times, isn't it?"

"Sure is." The man's gaze had returned to the flames. "I'll feel a lot better when I can throw these crutches away, though."

"Of course you will."

"I nearly died of shame this morning when that dog knocked

me off balance," he said, behind a grim laugh. "Feared for a moment my whole tummy had been split open."

"It was dreadful," she admitted, "dreadful."

He slipped his hand from under hers and ran it up and down the chair's arm-rest.

"I hope you don't think I'm adopting an escapist attitude in refusing to have any callers for a while. I know they're trying to be kind, but if there's one thing anyone in my condition abhors it's sympathy. Folks saying 'I'm so sorry for you, Gort,' or asking a lot of inane questions—understand, Mother?"

"Sure I do, darling, yet I'm afraid we're going to find it difficult keeping friends like old Sam away. Whatever shall I tell him?"

"Sam's different—I'll always be glad to see him."

"Then there's Jean Bardsley, Harry Malloy and——"

"Tell them I prefer not to see anyone for the time being."

"I'll do my best," she said, taking up the almost completed d'oyley from her knee, and studying intently its intricate pattern. "But you know how keen the people around here are to see you. The phone's hardly stopped ringing all afternoon."

He shrugged and, after lighting a cigarette, leaned back in the chair.

"I've a lot of re-adjusting to do, Mother. There's a revolution going on in my mind, and physically I'm one heck of a mess." She lifted both hands in a gesture of dumb protest, but he took a quick puff at the weed and resumed: "If I had sufficient money I'd get out of America for a while; migrate to some place where not a soul knew me. There the job of rehabilitating myself wouldn't hurt so much. I'd be able to shuffle through the years with my sticks and a little dignity, but I can't do that in Two Springs. Why? Because everywhere I go there'll be something to remind me of the man I was. Homes I've visited; places I've been, the golf club, for instance. It's going to have a terrible fascination for me. I'll probably be drawn there one day, and while watching the crowd going round, hear part of the President's speech of only two years ago: 'With this cup, Gort, go the congratulations and best wishes of every member. Let's give our new champion a big hand, fellers.' " The speaker's lips framed a half-smile. "All these things are going to sap my courage. But you can take it from me that I've no intention of crouching in a dark corner like some beaten cur." The cripple spread out his

hands. "Given time, and the chance to carry my head like a man, I'll have another crack at life some day. Meanwhile, all I ask is to be left alone, honey."

Mrs. Saunders rose and, kneeling before the fire, turned over one of the glowing logs. A good minute passed before she spoke:

"I'm afraid you're being a bit hypersensitive about those crutches, dear."

"Why, Mother?"

"Well, how many people do you see using them?"

"Hundreds."

"That's what I mean," she said, glancing over her shoulder. "I've noticed a number myself, yet I've not stopped in the street and thought: 'Oh, that poor fellow!' Have you?"

"No."

"Then why cut yourself off from everyone?"

"I thought I'd explained."

"But——"

"Honey."

"Hm, hm?"

"Mind if I go to bed now?"

She sighed and watched him struggling to his feet.

"What's wrong, Gort?"

"Nothing—I'm just tired."

"Depressed, too, aren't you?"

"Not particularly."

"Sure you're not keeping anything from me?"

"Of course."

"Swear to it?"

His gaze travelled to the end of the room and became fixed on the inert dove-grey curtains hanging across the windows.

"There is something," he said, drawing his body upright on the crutches, "but I'd rather not discuss it tonight."

She rose quickly, and on urgent feet moved towards him.

"You must tell me, Gort," she whispered. "Doesn't matter how awful it is, I've got to know—my baby, aren't you?"

"A mighty clumsy one, honey." The man's voice was cold, yet his eyes were soft and warm. "Too bad I grew up, huh?"

"You never did, dear—not to me."

"That sounds unusually sentimental, Mrs. Saunders," he said, reaching out and brushing a wisp of greying hair from her brow. "I'm thirty-two years of age, and had everything

gone my way I'd probably have been settled down by now with a small family—truth, isn't it?"

"Quite true, but you've still plenty of time."

"Not this guy, honey."

"Don't be silly, darling. Somewhere there's a young woman waiting for you."

"Even if there is, I'll still pass her by."

"But your heart will bring you back, Gort."

"You're wrong, Mother." His eyes had again taken on that cold expression. "Janney destroyed the best part of me, and what remained was blown to hell by a dum-dum bullet."

"How—how do you mean, dear?"

"That, even if I did fall in love with another woman, I couldn't ask her to marry me."

"But why—why?"

"Because you're looking at only half a man, honey."

"Half a man, I——"

She felt his strong arms close about her body; experienced a sharp stab of pain as her shrunken breasts were pressed suddenly against his heaving chest, then heard a voice—Gort's—saying:

"If you harbour any ideas of ever becoming a grandmother, better forget it. Colonel Bassington made that very clear on the day before he returned to Korea—good night."

Through tear-washed eyes she watched him climbing the stairs. He moved slowly; placed the end of his crutches firmly on one step before giving a little hop to negotiate those difficult eight inches. The mother's heart lifted with her son's body, and without being conscious of it her hands kept pushing forward as if she were trying to help him by remote control.

Before Gort had gained the landing, she felt utterly exhausted. A light film of sweat showed around her trembling lips, and every piece of furniture in the room seemed to be gliding towards her; kept growing in height and proportion until the whole place was full of rosewood, cedar and huge pastel-coloured vases which gave out an unfamiliar perfume, so sweet as to fill the distressed mother's nostrils with nausea.

Suddenly all this passed. She was herself again, badly shaken, granted, yet sufficiently resolute in character to meet this terrible crisis with the dignity it warranted.

"Gort!"

• He stopped and leaned over the banister.

"Yes, Mother?"

"Just after your father and I were married Dr. Watson swore we'd never have a child—I was supposed to be barren." The speaker sucked in a quick breath. "Made an awful liar of him, didn't we, darling?"

He laughed, almost soundlessly.

"I reckon it's you who's doing the lying right now, honey—come on, admit it."

"As God's my witness I swear I'm telling the truth, Gort."

"Had an operation or something, huh?"

"No."

"Then how did you have me?"

"It just happened—Dr. Watson called you a medical phenomenon."

"Mother?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I get the moral, but unfortunately it doesn't apply to me."

"Only the future can decide that, Gort."

"You're off the beam, honey—miles off."

"I'm going to keep on praying for you just the same, though."

"Won't do any good—Colonel Bassington knew what he was talking about."

"I thought Dr. Watson did, too."

"That was a long time ago, Mother. These days surgeons don't make mistakes."

She moved back a pace so as to get a better view of his face.

"Mrs. Fargo—remember her, Gort?"

"Sure."

"Well, she had a baby only last week."

"So what?"

"Linda has been married twelve years, dear, and, like me, was supposed to be barren."

He did not speak, just stood there leaning over the banister, regarding her with a strange expression in his eyes. One, two minutes passed before she noticed him straighten.

"Organically you and Mrs. Fargo were O.K., honey," he said, "whereas half of my stomach's been cut away. That makes the difference, I guess—'bye now."

Mrs. Saunders heard, but did not see, her son hobbling towards his room. She was going to break down any second, and tonight, for the first time in over a decade, she lacked the strength or the desire to fight emotion—her poor, throbbing heart felt full of tears.

CHAPTER VII

OLD Sam Murphy was Irish and proud of it. He had arrived in America forty-five years before as a young man of twenty, ill-equipped to attain a place of note in a new world. An only child of poverty-stricken parents, he had been denied anything approaching a decent education, yet notwithstanding this lack of scholastic attributes, young Sam's long frame and willing spirit had carried him through the joys and vicissitudes of life.

A man of many parts, he had tried his hand at cow-punching, gold-prospecting, animal-training, carpentry, selling vacuum cleaners and a number of other ventures before undertaking the responsibilities which go with married life.

In November of nineteen hundred and ten, Mary Lou had presented him with twin sons, and in the following year another boy. Sam, sublimely happy in his home-life, decided to strive for better things. He bought a small grocer's shop in Lincoln Street, and by hard work, not to mention his eagerness to please, increased the turnover by almost two hundred per cent. in the first six months.

In nineteen seventeen Sam enlisted; returned two years later with the stench of the Western Front in his nostrils, yet proud of heart because of a belief that he had participated in a war to end all wars. Meanwhile his business had prospered. Better still, his children, handsome kids all of them, were going "great guns" at school, and Mary Lou, God bless her, was looking prettier than ever.

Five, ten, fifteen years passed. The boys grew up; went through high school with flying colours, and after finishing their education at Notre Dame University returned to Two Springs as young men qualified in three different professions. Sam's mind, however, had become a little uneasy. He didn't like the way things were shaping in Europe. That codger Hitler was up to no good, and unless something happened "quick-smart" there would be another war. Didn't make sense nohow, yet everyone was talking about it.

The Nazis' march into Danzig had pushed Sam's blood-pressure up to a dangerous level. He walked about in a daze;

didn't have much heart for business. "Bless my soul," he used to say to practically every customer, "in nineteen eighteen they told us wars were through, and here they are at it again."

The fall of France, the blitz on London and Rommel's spectacular advance towards Alexandria had cost Sam many a sleepless night. "Mary Lou," he often muttered in that half-American, half-Irish brogue of his, "I'm sure scared about those boys of ours. America's bound to be drawn into this war before long."

Pearl Harbour had confirmed his worst fears. Sam knew there was nothing he could do about it when Paul, Peter and Timothy joined the Marines, asking to be assigned to the same ship.

Even now the old man's eyes smarted, when he recalled those dreadful years of waiting; waiting for a destroyer which had exploded on the morning of the 20th of July, 1944, near Sumatra.

Sam sold his business with the idea of leaving Two Springs, but tragedy had not completed mauling the man. Heart-broken by the loss of her boys, Mary Lou, within a month of hearing the terrible news, took an overdose of phenobarbitone tablets. The court called it suicide, but Sam would not have this; she was murdered, he told everyone, murdered by a white devil and a yellow ape, known respectively as Hitler and Tojo.

These days the old fellow lived alone in a small cottage on Rigney Avenue and, although comfortably off, whiled away the long hours beautifying a few of his favourite ex-customers' gardens. Every Sunday, however, wet or fine, snow or driving wind, he could be seen, flowers in hand, plodding up the hill towards Two Springs Cemetery, where his beloved Mary Lou was buried.

This particular morning Sam had arrived at the Saunders' house near seven o'clock and set about cutting the lawn with their motor mower. By nine, the task completed, he began pulling out some weeds from a bed of daffodils adjacent to the garage. Intent on his job, the old man did not hear Gort approach. Several handfuls of sorrel grass had been added to a pile near where he knelt before Sam glanced round at the figure watching him.

He was slow to rise; rheumatics had been clawing at the old fellow's ankles these past eight years, yet this painful complaint was in no way responsible for Sam's lack of agility.

In one startled glance his blue eyes had summed up everything: Gort's sunken cheeks; the crutches, and that expression, a mixture of embarrassment and pleasure which just now sat like lines of torture on a dead man's face.

"Well, well, if it's not me old friend?" he muttered, rising and brushing the dirt from his fingers. "Looking real smart you are, too—when did you get back, laddie?"

"Yesterday," Gort said, gripping the extended fingers warmly. "How have you been keeping, Sam?"

"Fine, fine." The gardener's voice held both a lilt and a break. Tender of heart at any time, he was fighting with all he had to suppress his feelings. "And that wonderful mother of yours, I'll wager she's right up in them clouds this mornin'."

"Neither of us slept very well last night." Gort had dropped one crutch and, using the other for support, was lowering himself on to the grass. "Still living alone, old-timer?"

"That's how I want it, son," the other answered, bending down to retrieve his trowel. "I've a fine garden, one of the best in Two Springs, even if I do say so meself. Must come along and see it soon."

"I'd like to—how about a smoke, Sam?"

"I'll fill me pipe if yer don't mind, laddie."

Half an hour passed. They had touched on many subjects: politics, television, the possibility of another world war, the Attlee Government's policy of nationalisation and its effect on Anglo-American relations. All these things had been discussed, yet up till now both men had purposely avoided personal issues.

Sam, though naturally curious about Gort, was content just to sit there until his young friend gave him an opening. In all probability this would never have occurred had not Mrs. Saunders arrived on the scene with their morning coffee.

"I knew I'd find you together," she said, placing the tray on a garden bench. "Were you surprised, Sam?"

"Surprised, and very glad, ma'am," he muttered, taking off his battered grey felt hat; "couldn't believe me eyes for a minute when I looks up and sees the young fella."

Mrs. Saunders began pouring the coffee, but every few seconds her glance met Sam's. She was wondering how much Gort had told him.

"Those roses over there are looking mighty healthy," the

old man said, gesturing towards the back fence. "I'll start pruning them next week."

Mrs. Saunders nodded and handed Sam his cup. He sipped at the hot fluid, smacked his lips, then looked towards Gort.

"You've lost a bit of weight, laddie—good twenty pounds, I'd reckon."

"Nearer thirty, Sam, but I'll soon put it on again."

"Sure you will. Plenty of chicken broth, and a good rum toddy going to bed; nothing like it, son."

Mrs. Saunders broke the short silence.

"Gort's going to feel a lot better when he throws away those silly crutches, aren't you, dear?"

"That'll be the day," Sam agreed, taking a biscuit from the plate. "In no time he'll be down at the golf club, knocking one of those little white pills about—right, laddie?"

"Sure," the cripple murmured, running both hands through the grass. "Sure."

Mrs. Saunders was again trying to catch Sam's eyes, but unfortunately for all concerned, his were still fixed upon her son.

"Only seems like yesterday since you arrived home with that big cup, don't it?" the gardener went on behind a light chuckle. "I remember the afternoon well. I'd just finished putting some tools away when your car——"

"Have some more coffee?" Mrs. Saunders interrupted, holding the pot forward. "Might as well finish it off."

"I've hardly touched this yet," Sam responded, holding up his cup for inspection, "but if you like to leave it there, ma'am, I'll help myself presently."

"That's our phone ringing, honey," Gort told his mother before she had time to replace the pot. "Old-timer will help me carry in these things later."

She stood for some moments as if undecided what to do, then with an "Oh, I'd better answer it," hurried towards the house. They watched her running figure until it disappeared behind a high evergreen hedge, at which Sam, in between nibbling his biscuit, went on:

"Yes, I can still see you hopping out of your car with that silver cup. Jenny Lynne—I'll never forget her face. Sitting up there beside yer she was, proud as——" The gardener hesitated and threw an embarrassed look at his companion. "But sure, I don't think you'll be wanting to talk about that young lady any more, eh, lad?"

Gort plucked a blade of grass from the lawn. He was stripping it into tiny shreds as he said:

"I've finished with Jenny and golf, old-timer, both of them. One gave me the brush-off, the other I can only watch from now on."

Sam was pushing his coffee spoon with an easy, circular movement, but suddenly the hand became quite still.

"Reckon you're talking a bit of nonsense now, son. If you said you'd finished with these godless wars, I'd understand."

"War's out too."

"But why golf? Most everyone around here thinks you've the makings of a real champion, and——"

Gort's laugh drowned out the other's words. His voice, bitter as gall, followed it:

"See those sticks beside me, Sam?"

"Looking at 'em, ain't I?"

"Know what happens when I throw them away?"

"You'll get up on your two feet and walk, son."

"Not a hope."

Sam placed his cup aside. Up till a minute ago he had been enjoying the coffee, but now its rich fragrance made him feel sick. For a while he sat staring, first at Gort's bent head, then across the garden, and all the time that choking lump in his throat kept enlarging. Presently he bent slightly forward:

"If you meant what I'm thinking, I'd better clean up this pile of weeds and get home—not crippled, are yer, son?"

"I'll be able to get about."

"How?"

"On walking-sticks."

"But——"

"On the retreat to Seoul I got plugged in the guts by a dum-dum bullet—it finished me for keeps."

The old man rose. Tears were already filling his eyes, but shame did not make him bend down and gather up that armful of weeds. "Finished me for keeps." Those words had done something to him; stirred within Sam an overpowering anger which for years he had tried to suppress. No, it was not directed at Gort; he was no part of it, for the hostility tearing at Sam Murphy's soul reached out far beyond the garden, shot like four shafts of searing flame towards all horizons. The whole of mankind was being judged and condemned by this humble creature of God.

"I'm just a simple guy," his thoughts ran. "I have lived

and loved; felt a baby's arms around me neck, and the warmth of its mother's body at night. I've been honest in me mode of life, kindness to others has been me creed. I've worked hard, lived cleanly, given the best I had to offer, yet now in the eventide of me life I'm goin' to say a lot of things I've kept bottled up inside for years.

"Lot of fools, that's what yer are—go on fightin', murderin' and killin' while God's up there in His heaven, sighin'. Is that right? 'Ave yer forgotten what decency stands fer? I had three sons once; fine lads they were, too, but yer must 'ave yer silly wars. Fer sure, I fought in one meself, but not fer this kinda world, though. I came back believing that sanity would lift her bloody face from the mud of France, hold it high for all mankind to see, but yer didn't want to look and the few who did had short memories. Most of yer went on living in the same old way, selfishly, grabbing everything yer could without a thought for anyone else. That's why Hitler became a dictator. Yer laughed at him at first, but before he and those Japanese had shot their bolt, they'd destroyed everything we'd fought to save, including yer own sons and mine. And now it's happening all over again. That kid over there, he's just one of millions who's paying the price of yer own folly. But it's no use talking, the time fer thinking and speeches is past, as is man's chance of being as God intended him to be. It's——"

"Have you a light, old-timer?"

The gardener started violently before turning. Gort stood only a few paces away glaring down at an obstinate lighter.

"Why, sure I have," Sam Murphy said, dropping the weeds and taking a match-box from his shirt pocket. "Keep those, son, I've some more in me coat."

"Thanks." Gort lit a cigarette, then smiled across at his friend. "What's on your mind, Sam?"

"Been doin' a bit o' thinkin', lad."

"I know that—not very pleasant thoughts either, if I'm any judge."

"Far from it—mad world, isn't it?"

"Crazy as hell."

"A couple of years ago," the other went on, shaking his white head from side to side, "I happened to pick up one of Peter's books. Small volume it was, bound in leather, and nicely printed. Feeling a bit down in the mouth, I carried it to me favourite chair near the fire, and started reading it." The blue eyes dropped under Gort's steady gaze. "It was a

wild night, you could hear God's anger in the storm, and every now and then the chimney's down-draught brought a deep roar from the fire's heart. I nearly put the book aside several times; couldn't understand much of the stuff in it, to be honest, but probably because just sitting there with one of Peter's books in me 'and brought him closer, I kept on. Near eleven o'clock, on turning over a page, I noticed a few lines in me son's own handwriting. It went something like this: 'Not until we reincarnate the dead and kill off the living will this poor war-torn world know the true meaning of peace.' " The speaker gave a mirthless chuckle. "Sort of hits the nail right on the head, don't it, lad?"

"That's a very nice slice of philosophy," Gort returned quietly. "Sounds just like Peter, too. Deep thinker, wasn't he?"

"Always—they often come to visit me—their mother, too."

"I understand, old-timer."

"We don't talk—just sit and look at each other."

"Still fretting, aren't you, Sam?"

"One gets past even that stage," the gardener said, running a toil-stained hand across his wet eyes. "Many's the time I've got so full of hurt I could hardly breathe. Care to go for a walk, son?"

"Where, Sam?"

"Far as my place. I'm knocking off now—be back in the mornin' though."

"Feeling a bit off colour, eh?"

"Kinda—I can't get over what you said."

"Could have been worse, I suppose, old-timer."

"Sure, but you were such a fine upstanding man—can't imagine you getting about like that."

"I'll become accustomed to it, I guess."

Without further comment the gardener walked away. Gort followed. He watched Sam take his coat from the garage, then moved with him along the drive. They had covered a good fifty yards before the cripple spoke:

"Becoming quite an expert, aren't I?"

"Doing fine, laddie."

"Sam?"

"Hm, hm?"

"You know Jenny Lynne's in town."

The gardener looked over his right shoulder.

"That doesn't mean anything to us, does it, son?"

"No, sir."

"Had she done right by you, this wouldn't have happened. Your hopping about like a lame duck, I mean."

"Her marrying Dempsey won me a few decorations, anyway." Gort had stopped at the gate and was pushing it open for his companion. "I received mother's letter only a few days before our division landed at Iwo Jima. Up till then life seemed terribly important, but after reading about Jenny's running off with that guy I just didn't care what happened." The speaker laughed shortly. "Sure gave me a lot of guts, though. Should have been killed a dozen times, but luck was all with me those days, I guess."

Sam passed through the gate, halted, and began searching for his pipe.

"Queer business, life, ain't it, lad?"

"Very."

"For instance, had Jenny Lynne not met Dempsey, you wouldn't have joined up for this Korean show, and she'd not be roaming around Two Springs looking like a ghost." The old man grunted. "Mind yer, a bit sorry I was for Jenny when I spotted her last Thursday—couldn't help thinkin' of what might have happened had she not been swept off her feet. After all, it was war-time, I told meself, and human emotions were being thrown around like dimes—still felt her way a bit this mornin' as I walked over here, but now me feelings 'ave 'ardened, laddie—gone kinda sour."

"That makes two of us," Gort said, running both hands along the gate's steel rail. "No? because of her, though—she doesn't count in my scheme of things any more."

Sam lit his pipe, drew hard at it for a while, then looked up.

"Got any plans, son?"

"I'm hatching a few."

"Nothing definite yet, eh?"

"No."

"What about yer old job?"

"That's out."

"Why?"

"Architecture's lost its appeal for me—a lot of other things, too."

"Kinda confused, ain't yer?"

"Hobbling around in a mental fog, Sam."

"But it'll clear, it'll clear."

"Hope so."

"In much pain?"

"Fair bit."

"Not sleeping too well, eh?"

"Badly."

"Taking any dope?"

"Couldn't manage without it."

"What sort?"

"Physeptone tablets."

"Must be something new."

"Not really—they've been in use for some time."

"I've not heard of them, nohow," Sam muttered, spitting across the footpath. "Never been over-keen on drugs meself—always a danger of them gettin' a hold of a man." He smiled. "Wouldn't like to see that happen to you, lad."

"Don't worry—it won't."

"That's the stuff."

"Sam?"

"Yes, son?"

"Ever been scared?"

"Sure—nearly died of fright whenever I saw one of them telegraph kids in our street during the war."

"Then you should know how I'm feeling right now."

"What are you scared of, lad?"

"The future—can't work out how I'm going to cope with it."

"There's one thing you want to bear in mind, though."

"What?"

"Yer did come back."

"A part of me did."

"Part of yer?"

"Right, by God."

A dozen questions jumped to the old man's startled lips, but before even one could achieve utterance Gort had swung about and was moving across the lawn.

CHAPTER "VIII

MID-DAY, and the Dijon Club, a white single-storied structure on Vila's Rue Higginson, sat perched like a tired ibis on its high, oil-smear'd pillars. Until well after dawn the place had been packed. Here last night Monsieur Peley, after a shocking run of luck, and his thirtieth whisky, had thrown on the table the deeds of a plantation at Malekula; staked everything he owned on the turn of a card, and lost.

Later, an Australian engineer named Humphries, who was en route to Papeete, started playing with a bank of twenty pounds. Two hours later he staggered towards the wharf, drunk as a lord, but richer by nearly two hundred thousand francs.

Now, however, the long gaming tables were deserted; only the stale smell of smoke from a number of over-packed ash-trays, which at the moment were being collected by a sphinx-faced New Hebridean native, bore testimony to just another night of debauchery.

At the far end of the room a lone figure sat sipping at a glass of period. His blue eyes, heavy from lack of sleep and an over-indulgence in liquor, were deep in thought as they gazed towards the island of Iririki rising from the harbour's shimmering waters with a dignity both arresting and beautiful.

Doctor Balant numbered among several of Vila's mystery men, but whereas the other four had long since lost interest for the curious, this prematurely grey-headed, handsome man in his early fifties was still a subject of discussion wherever a group of English or French ladies gathered. As for the men, they were a little more philosophic. Occasionally, if things were quiet at the club, one might point out "the Doc," as he was called, to a stranger and say:

"There, Monsieur, is our most interesting character. He arrived here fifteen years ago, or I should say his yacht *Blue Wings* was wrecked one night during a storm on the reef out there. How he and his baby daughter ever made the shore was little short of a miracle, yet Monsieur Clark, who those

days was managing Burns Philp's store, saw them early the following morning clinging to a spar."

Here the teller would probably draw his companion to the window, and while indicating a coral reef continue the dramatic story of Doctor Balant. "Looks peaceful enough now, does it not, Monsieur? But on the morning I'm talking of, the wrath of God could be heard. Huge seas were running, and those palms along the waterfront were bent double across the road. For a while it seemed we could only stand by and watch man and child being dashed to pieces, as neither outrigger nor launch could have lasted more than a few minutes in that churning hell. Then the miracle happened—I always refer to it as such, anyway. A huge wave rolled over the reef, broke into a raging green mass, came together again, picked up Monsieur Balant, and the baby tied to his back, lifted them like the feather of a dove, and deposited both on that little beach—see, over there."

The new-comer, by now deeply interested, would no doubt mutter a shocked "Good God, the child was dead, of course," at which his narrator would smile and resume: "We thought so too, at first, but after carrying them to Madame Journez's hotel and wrapping their lacerated bodies in warm blankets, both recovered within a few hours, little the worse for their experience."

At this point the speaker would sip at his drink, and while tracing some imaginary design on the table-top, continue: "Why Doctor Balant decided to settle here is still a topic for much conjecture; for Vila, at its best, is quite unworthy of such a man. He's a first-class surgeon, a brilliant linguist, plus an artist of no mean note. Yet, for fifteen long years, he has remained in this little backwater, attending to the needs of natives, New Hebridean, Chinese and Tonkinese. If perchance you were to visit his surgery, however, he would be most polite, but very rarely has he been known to treat a European."

Here the affable Frenchman would, no doubt, spread out his hands in a gesture of dismay before proceeding: "Ah, but I'm ahead of myself, Monsieur. The man I've described was the old Doctor Balant. Now everything, it is changed. Once he loved company and was so very gay, but what do you see today? A wreck of a man, who sits alone drinking *ouls* pernod after another. Naturally we are terribly sorry for him, Monsieur; there's not a Frenchman here who at one time or another hasn't attempted to lift him out of his state

of melancholy, but it is no use. He brushes us aside, refuses to listen, so we just watch him, and all the time we grieve for his beautiful daughter, Angélique, who will shortly be returning from a finishing school in Paris—ah, yes, it is all so very sad.”

The drunken man’s eyes were full of mockery as they swept along Iririki Island. He stared for a long time at the British Residency with an air of amusement, yet when his gaze became fixed on the hospital, a sprawling old-fashioned building surrounded by lawns and inert palms, a shadow, as of sadness, hovered over his lean, aristocratic face.

Suddenly Doctor Balant sighed. Ah, yes, he had paid dearly for listening to the call of the tropics. As a youth his adventurous spirit had been caught by books about the South Seas, and, at twenty-nine, just when it seemed his genius for surgery was about to lift him to high places, the tropics had won.

Doctor Balant smiled at the colourless fluid which remained in his glass; watched it slide from side to side, as he tilted it, first to the right, and then to the left. Of course, everyone had been against his throwing aside such a promising career. His tearful mother had begged him to carry on at the Holy Trinity Hospital, and his father, a well-known Paris wine merchant, had threatened, pleaded, then finally, in a moment of great anger, challenged his son to a duel. Annabella, too, the girl he was soon to marry, had also urged him to remain. “Ah, Jacques,” he had heard her whisper countless times over the past twenty years, “am I not to be considered? I love you and am so interested in your career. There is so much for both of us here, but the Ellice Islands, no, no. I could not go there. Papa is ill and needs me. Please, please, Jacques, do not do this foolish thing.”

The man shrugged. What a great pity he’d been so headstrong. Again, why hadn’t he stopped to weigh substance against shadow. Doctor Balant laughed quietly. Perhaps because he’d grown a little bored with Paris, or maybe because he had no defence against that urge in him to spend at least five years in faraway places. Yes, yes, the islands had called. His silly ears had heard the whisper, and so he had followed the voice of his own dark destiny. For what? Fame? Mon Dieu, no. Glory? Absurd. Peace of mind? Chaos and regret. Angélique? Warmth spread quickly across the coldness in Doctor Balant’s eyes. Ah, yes, she alone stood guard against the accusations of his conscience. Yet—

he sighed. Even Angélique could not dispel or hold back the ever-growing dread in his heart.

Once he had possessed the mental strength to shut it out, but the years were catching up on him. In December his daughter would be twenty-one and must be told.

The dreamer's long, hairless fingers closed tightly about the glass. Perhaps, in a way, he was not altogether to blame, so much had happened that year. First, he had received news of his father's death, and three months later the ship carrying Madame Balant to his island domain in Niutoo had gone down with all hands during a hurricane. This tragedy, though making him independent for life, had been the cause of his taking to drugs.

Then, one day, that letter from Annabella. She had been very patient; waited for months without receiving any news. Oh, yes, she still loved her Jacques, always would, but early in the year she had met someone else. Pierre was very kind; reminded her of him in a way. His mannerisms, mainly; the way he smiled, his habit of lifting both eyebrows when stressing a point. Pierre adored her. They would be married before this letter reached him.

Doctor Balant's gaze left the hospital's gleaming galvanized iron roof to become fixed on an outrigger manned by two natives as it glided past; their dark, uncovered bodies, and black fuzzy hair seemed to sicken him, for he closed his eyes tightly as if the sight revolted him. Ah, that was better! Queer how at times his whole being quivered at the sight of black bodies.

The man's lips tightened. No, it wasn't queer at all. They were part of his past. For over a year he'd been one of them—as a drug-addict, tanned native. Hadn't he roamed about the island until the terrible awakening? After that he had pulled himself together and begun the slow, heart-breaking task of rehabilitating himself. Two long years it had taken to throw off the habit. Another two before chance brought Monsieur Leclerc to Niutoo; broke, and with a yacht for sale.

Tahiti, the Solomon, New Guinea, all these places he and little Angélique had visited; pleasant years, sunshine, wind and rain, gliding over moonlit seas with the creaking of masts and a child's voice filling the night.

Lord Howe, Norfolk. At each island they had surfed, laughed and fished, lain for hours side by side in the warm sun, while God, time and their own kindred spirit drew them

together—drew them together as the sky does its stars, the sea, its mists.

A shudder passed through the dreamer's tall frame. Vila, eh? Little did he imagine, on the day they had left Kingston, that this narrow-gutted place would claim him for fifteen years: They were on their way back to France when the hurricane struck, and——

He started when the native waiter spoke:

"More service, master?"

The white man placed his glass aside.

"No, Amedi, I've had enough. My topee, please fetch it."

Five minutes later Doctor Balant could have been seen swaying along the sun-drenched Rue Higginson. Nothing stirred along the road, but under the veranda of a store several natives were resting on benches, and they, like the flies feeding on the mangled body of a rotten fish, seemed reluctant to move.

He had almost completed the long climb up the Rue Picanon when Monsieur Nebrac, a short, moon-faced, pleasant little man, with huge brown eyes, drew his new Peugeot to a halt on the opposite side of the street.

"Come, Jacques," he called. "I'll drive you home."

Doctor Balant pulled his swaying body into that over-erect position not uncommon to inebriates.

"Bon jour," he greeted. "How are you, Maurice?"

"Ah, but it is hot," the French Commissioner laughed, using his topee as a fan. "I'm going over to visit Madame Poulet—she had another baby last night."

"Indeed!" the other exclaimed, moving cautiously across the rough gravelled road. "Boy or girl, Maurice?"

"Girl." Monsieur Nebrac watched his friend approach with a heavy heart. "Pity, great pity," he muttered to himself every time the doctor's unsteady legs threatened to throw their owner off balance. He smiled, however, when the taller man climbed in beside him.

"They played for high stakes at the club last night, Jacques."

"Quite true." The passenger had made himself comfortable in the bucket seat, and was mopping his perspiring face. "Pele, he went crazy, and ended up losing the last of his plantations on Malekula."

"You were there, of course."

"I was, but did not watch the game."

"So different to the old days, eh, Jacques? Once you found so much enjoyment at the tables."

Dr. Balant's voice conveyed annoyance, and his voice, despite its thickness, was crisp.

"Can I not please myself what I do, Maurice?"

"Of course, of course," the Commissioner returned, lifting his fat hands in a gesture of apology, "but of late you are a great worry to me, Jacques—worry me very much."

"Then reserve your concern for others."

"You are offended?"

"As you knew I would be."

"Jacques?"

"Well?"

"I was speaking for Angélique. She will be home next month and would not like to see you this way."

Doctor Balant made as though to get out of the car, but Monsieur Nebrac placed a restraining hand on the drunken man's shoulders, saying:

"Please do not be like that, Jacques. Once we were great friends; played cards and attended parties together, but now you are aloof, and so odd in your manner. I do not understand."

"Why try, Maurice?"

"Because I have a wholesome respect for you."

"Even now?"

"This is just a phase—you will get over it."

"That's where you're wrong, Maurice—I can't."

"Do get back into the seat, Jacques."

"No—I'm going to walk."

"Not in the state you're in."

"I've been much worse and got home without assistance."

"But I want to talk with you."

"That's why I've decided to walk."

"Then will you listen to me for a few minutes?"

"Depends on what you have to say."

"Tanna—I intend visiting there next week. Would you care to come along?"

"You are kind, Maurice, but I must decline."

"Ten days' cruise would do you so much good, though."

"Not in my present frame of mind."

"What ails you, Jacques?"

"I have much to think about?"

"As a friend, is there anything I can do to help you?"

Doctor Balant stepped from the car, and when he turned

Monsieur Nebrac was appalled by what he saw in the older man's face. Five minutes ago it had been stained by an alcoholic flush, but now pallor had taken control, was spreading like an old ivory fan being opened.

"I want you to do something for me, Maurice."

"Anything, Jacques," the Commissioner murmured, leaning sideways. "Anything in my power."

A faint smile showed for a moment on the drunken man's lips.

"Slowly, but surely," he said, closing the door, "I'm developing into a recluse. There was a time, not very long ago either, when I enjoyed nothing more than a house full of friends, but overnight, as it were, I turned my back on life. No, no, don't ask me why; I can't tell you. But there is a reason, Maurice. Doubtless everyone in this rotten hole will know of it one day. Until then, however, I wish to be left alone." The speaker stepped back a pace. "If, for instance, we meet in the street, and I pass you by without a word of greeting, don't think ill of me. Instead, try and remember that across the path of everyone's destiny a shadow is to be found. Mine is sliding across the past. Soon it will be upon me, and neither God, the devil nor you can do anything about it."

Doctor Balant's lurching figure had almost reached the hilltop before Monsieur Nebrac stirred. Muttering to himself in French, he swung the car around. Those flowers for Madame Poulet would have to wait. Meanwhile he'd drive out to Erakor to try and get things straight in his mind. Mon Dieu, Jacques looked terrible.

CHAPTER IX

THE strong southerly wind that hit Two Springs near one o'clock was scattering yesterday's fallen leaves over Hollis Park as Gort sank on to a bench under the frantically swaying branches of an autumn-tinted oak. It had been a particularly embarrassing day for him. Three weeks had passed since his discharge from hospital, and after lunch, goaded by tormenting thoughts which of late often possessed him, he had determined to try to master the art of using two walking-sticks presented to him yesterday by Sam.

On reaching the front gate, however, he had tarried, hesitated like a scared child about to venture into a strange world; but during those minutes of indecision he happened to catch sight of his mother watching him from the veranda, and with a muffled "Be darned to pride," he'd shuffled on to the footpath.

Since then he had covered a good three miles and, despite the fact of his having avoided the main streets, he'd met at least a dozen people. All had sickened him: Mrs. Hudson with her tears; Harry Jackson with his wisecracks. "Wouldn't mind taking you on for a dollar a hole these days, feller." So it had gone on all afternoon. Sympathy, tears, questions. In their company Gort had kept grinning; tried to make a good showing, but every yard covered had caused him great physical pain, and every acquaintance encountered became an ordeal.

"Why in the hell don't they leave a man alone?" he had asked himself repeatedly. "Either that or quit referring to these sticks. Fools don't seem to realize how a guy feels getting along like this."

Gort had been sitting staring across the playing field for some time before he became conscious of the three boys at goal practice only a short distance away. The scene brought back memories. Sure, sure, what a great moment—two minutes to go and old Duke 'Varsity dragging by four points. Seemed pretty hopeless with Hadley's forwards in possession. No, Burton had lost the ball, and Hike Cody was gathering it up in that gorilla-like hand of his—was setting himself

for a long pass. Up it went, hurtling through space like a rocket released from a firing-tube, but, heck, he couldn't make it, not unless eagerness gave him wings. A desperate leap; the feel of wet leather, and he was streaking down the field with a football held fast in the crook of his right arm.

Gort smiled as a man usually does when he watches his shadow racing towards a line which spells for it a moment of supreme glory. Side-stepping, weaving, brushing aside arms designed to bring him down, the ghost of Gordon Saunders sped on. Only ten yards to go, his lungs seemed ready to burst. Joe Leventhal, Hadley's star "back," was coming at him now, appeared to be gaining on him—a second of doubt—Joe's huge body had left the ground—was flying straight at him—impact—the shock of tired muscles—a feeling of temporary paralysis as sodden earth raced on beneath his half-closed eyes, then a terrific roar of—

"Mind kicking over my ball, please, soldier?" The voice, soft and youthful, seemed to have travelled a long way before reaching Gort. He looked up quickly to see a youngster about fourteen leaning against the fence.

"It's behind that tree," the boy went on when Gort made no attempt to move. "Would get it myself only I stopped a kick in the ankle—can just about hobble on it."

The man's embarrassed eyes swept towards the ball. It lay in some long grass not twenty yards from him. For a moment he experienced black anger; felt like snapping the kid's head off and saying: "Get the darned thing yourself," but after another hurried glance in the youngster's direction, he laughed quietly.

"We're both in the same boat, feller. I'm having a spot of bother with my legs, too. Stay there and I'll see what I can do, though."

As Gort was struggling to his feet, however, the boy crawled through two strands of wire.

"Don't you bother," he called, walking painfully towards the tree. "Sorry for troubling you." Gathering up the ball, he threw it to a tall freckle-faced youth who stood waiting.

"'Bout time, too," his companion snarled, giving the leather a vicious kick. "Come on, let's get on with the game, will yer?"

But Buster Jackson only grinned and, turning on his heels, approached Gort.

"Sorry, mister, I didn't notice those sticks."

"That's all right, kid."

"Mind if I sit down?"

"Course not."

"Thanks a lot." The boy slipped a mud-smeared handkerchief from his jeans and began wiping a good-looking face. "What's your name?"

"Gort."

"Mine's Buster." He held out his hand. "Glad to know you."

"Same here."

The new-comer changed his position on the bench; sat straddle-legged so he could keep Gort in his vision without turning.

"You're a captain, I see."

"I was. I'll be getting out of these clothes next week."

"They're last war decorations, aren't they?"

"Hm, hm."

"Then why are you still wearing uniform?"

"I've not been back long."

"From Korea?"

"Right first guess."

"Geel" Buster's eyes were aglow. "Say, am I pleased I met you, Captain—what's it like?"

Gort appeared to be watching the ball, just then in flight, but he was studying his companion through the corner of his eye.

"Even when you're knocking hell out of those Commos," he said softly, "Korea's still 'bout the darndest place you can imagine. Trouble is, they occasionally knocked hell out of us."

The boy laughed confidently.

"That's the interesting part. Wouldn't be much good if we were winning all the time, would it?"

"Give me the choice, and I'd stay on the winning side, Buster. War's not like a game of football, you know."

"Wish I were five years older, though, Captain."

"You'd join up, eh?"

"Sure would—I'm simply itching to get a gun in my hand."

"I thought along those lines myself once."

"Who doesn't? If a country's worth living in, it's worth fighting for, don't you think?"

"Guess so."

Buster thrust the handkerchief back into his pocket, then leaned forward with both hands pressed against the bench.

"There's only one thing troubling me, Captain."

"What, kid?"

"Those reports we hear about the North Koreans not fighting fair—are they really true?"

In silence Gort lit a cigarette. He was in two minds. One prompted him to disillusion the boy completely; tell him that, in war, no one fought according to rules. The other thought, however, was more kindly; became uppermost because of Buster's tender years and his own mental meanderings of that morning down the by-ways of an almost forgotten youth.

Then, suddenly, all he wanted to do was to get out of the park—for Jenny Lynne, hatless, and carrying a small shopping basket, was walking straight towards them.

When less than thirty yards from where he sat, she called to one of the boys:

"Has Buster gone home?"

"He's over there, Mrs. Dempsey," the youngster intimated, indicating the oak, "under that tree; has a sore ankle, or something."

"You're wanted." Gort, in his eagerness to be gone, had knocked one of his sticks from the bench. "Better run along, kid."

"I'll get that for you first," Buster offered, for although very attracted to his aunt, he had reached a stage of adolescence when most lads resent a woman's checking up on their movements. There he was in deep conversation with the first soldier he had met from Korea, and now his aunt would probably ask him to carry her basket. Very inconsiderate, that's what it was.

Man and boy were standing side by side when Jenny Lynne emerged from behind the tree. She didn't notice Gort at first—the huge, smooth-barked trunk hid his figure from her view—but, on seeing Buster, she stopped and asked:

"What happened, dear?"

"Aw, nothing—I was just talking."

"To whom?"

"A friend of mine." He gestured towards Gort, who a few seconds before had started down the slight grassy slope. "That's so, isn't it, Captain?"

The cripple did not answer; he had risen too quickly, and pain was already tearing at his stomach, tearing and thumping and dragging. "Got to get away from here," he kept muttering; "don't want her to see you like this, do you?"

He had gained level ground and was making towards a path when her voice reached him.

"Oh, Gort—Gort!"

His uncertain feet did not hesitate; if anything, their rapid, shuffling movement increased in pace; slid in great haste over the earth's green carpet, but there was no escape from his pride or hurt young manhood, for Jenny Lynne was gaining on him with every stride.

When she caught at his sleeve he could have knocked her down; he didn't know why; it wasn't like him to hold a grudge or to hate like this, but—

"I didn't think you'd ever loathe me that much, Gort," she said, releasing his arm, "not after what we were to each other."

He was slow to meet her damp eyes; slow in a lot of things, slow in planting his feet wide apart so as to give him better balance, in leaning forward, slow even in attempting to answer her.

"You caught me unawares," he muttered bleakly. "Had I thought there was a chance of our meeting, I'd never have come near this place."

She walked back to the grassy slope, and after saying a few words to Buster stooped to retrieve her basket. Several eggs, she noticed, were broken, their white shells and anæmic-looking yolks floated across the face of a freshly baked apple tart. Jenny Lynne would never understand what she saw in that sickly mess to make her laugh, but she did; laughed until tears ran down her face, and her poor heaving breasts seemed about to burst.

Gort was nearing the park's main entrance before she again overtook him. Her hysteria had passed, and now she asked for nothing more than just a few minutes with him. There was so much to talk about; the good old days when, as children, they had wandered across these lawns, Gort carrying her school-case, she gathering small flat stones and trying to make them skip across the pond. All these precious moments she wanted to recapture, not for her sake as much as for his. He didn't look like Gort Saunders any more: that pathetic, shuffling figure she now walked beside was a stranger, both to himself and to—

"For God's sake can't you see I'm in a hurry." His voice, thick with humiliation, brought the girl to a sudden halt.

He was yards ahead before words formed on her unsteady lips.

"Please don't be so bitter, dear; I've suffered, too, you know—still do."

Unrelenting, pale of face, eyes glazed with pain, he went on, but half running, half walking, she caught him before he had reached the gate.

"It's so silly our going on like this," she whispered. "We loved each other once, Gort. Surely that alone warrants respect—or doesn't it?"

Her humble appeal released a little of the hurt which, for years, had lapped against the breakwater of his heart. Since that day, before Iwo Jima, he had often visualized Jenny and Dempsey together; out driving, in bed, her giving birth to his child; these torturing thoughts had filled him with revulsion, sickened him mentally and physically; yet at her words his bitterness receded. He stopped and looked at her.

"The world's swung round a few thousand times since then, Jenny Lynne," he said; "everything's changed, even that lily-pond we used to play around on the way home from school has been filled in—remember it?"

"Yes, oh, yes. I do." She was crying without a sound. "Oh, Gort, if we could only have those years over again—just the two of us."

His eyes softened for a moment, then quickly returned to their cold, impersonal expression.

"You can't hold back the wind, Jenny, or snatch a fistful of star-dust from the sky. You and I had our chance, I guess—not much use crying over spilt milk, is it?"

She placed aside her basket; the pale yellow yolks had broken, and were seeping through a hole in a packet of sugar, but she didn't care a hoot.

"Better do something about those eggs," he advised. "They'll make your basket smell to high heaven."

She picked up a small red pebble from the path before speaking.

"I don't care; there's plenty more where they came from."

"But I was thinking of your basket."

"The same goes for it, too."

"I see."

"Gort?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to get a divorce."

"Things as bad as that, eh?"

"Quite impossible—Cedric's just no good."

"What's wrong with him, Jenny Lynne?"

"For one thing he was hardly ever sober during the last six months we lived together." She paused, changed the pebble from one hand to the other, and went on slowly: "We'd only been married a short time when I realized what a terrible mistake I'd made, but, it was too late. Amber May was already on the way—she's so lovely, Gort."

"So Mother told me."

"Do you like her name?"

"Very pretty."

"She's going on for six now."

"Who's Amber May like?"

"Me, I think—she has the same colouring; brown eyes, auburn hair, even a small tip-tilted nose."

"That so?"

"Still fond of children, Gort?"

"They're all right, I guess."

"All right?" Her gaze was challenging his. "I recall the time you weren't past stopping in the street and playing marbles with any kid we chanced to meet."

"I've grown away from that sort of thing," he said, frowning. "These days I've got new and other ways of amusing myself."

Her eyes were looking right past him now.

"Changed, haven't you, Gort? Within yourself, I mean."

"We both have."

"You sound so bitter, though."

"Do I?"

"Terribly—it's such a great pity."

"I've just come through my second war, Jenny Lynne."

"Ma said you were badly wounded."

"I was."

"Seems so strange seeing you on those sticks."

"Suppose it does."

"How long will you be using them?"

"Some time yet."

"Weeks, or months?"

"Years, perhaps."

"Years?" Her startled gaze swept his face as if searching for a denial, but when it remained as before, pale and set, she gave a little shudder.

"No—oh, no."

His shoulders straightened in a quick irritable movement.

"There's no need to start bawling again, Jenny. I'll be O.K. It's just a matter of getting accustomed to these things."

"I'm not bawling."

"Then for heaven's sake put that handkerchief away and be a grown-up woman for once, will you?"

She obeyed his command with a meekness that belonged to the past, and picking up her basket, stood looking across at him.

"Coming home now, Gort?"

"No."

"But it's getting late—cold, too."

"I'll make my way back presently."

"Please don't snap at me like that."

"Sorry."

"I'm sorry too—sorry about what I did to you."

"You're sniffing again."

"I—I can't help it."

"You've something to show for living, though."

"What?"

"Amber May."

"She's not enough, Gort—not enough."

He drew his heels together slowly, painfully.

"Perhaps you expected too much, Jenny Lynne."

"I don't think so."

He did not pursue the subject; instead, changed the trend of the conversation by asking:

"Is Buster really your nephew?"

The handkerchief was busy again, dabbing at her eyes.

"Of course. He's Cedric's sister's child."

"Seems a nice kid."

"He is—were you talking to him for long?"

"Only about five minutes."

"Strange your meeting up with him ^{like} that, isn't it?"

"Sure is—a football brought us together."

"How, Gort?"

"Well, someone kicked it over the fence, and Buster asked me to boot it back."

"And—and you couldn't?"

"No, I couldn't."

He heard a muffled sob escape her lips, and taking a step nearer, muttered:

"Oh, I say!"

But Jenny Lynne did not hear a single word, for already her dainty flying feet were racing towards the gate.

CHAPTER X

MRS. SAUNDERS was turning a small loin of pork when the front door opened. She waited a few seconds for her son's habitual "Where are you, honey?" but when only that scraping sound of feet being dragged across carpet filled the silence, she hurried out of the kitchen.

Gort was half-way up the stairs when his mother gained the hall. On seeing him she gave a little scream, then stood motionless.

His voice, thick with whisky, struck against her ears like a whip.

"Sorry, honey, for coming home like this—had a fall, you know."

Her shocked eyes alone moved. Slowly they left his bleeding face, remained for a few moments on the mud-stained shoulders of his tunic, were lowered to become fixed on the broken walking-stick gripped in his lacerated right hand.

He spoke again.

"Don't stand there looking at me like that, Mother; anyone's liable to stumble—got home under my own steam, though, didn't I?"

Suddenly life returned to her compressed lips. She rushed forward, taking two steps at a time.

"Oh, Gort!" she kept saying, "Oh, Gort!"

"Now don't go all dramatic, honey. Give me five minutes in the bathroom, and I'll be O.K."

Mrs. Saunders was drawing a handkerchief over the left side of his face, and, for the first time in years, she was really crying.

"Been drinking, haven't you, darling?"

"Had a few whiskies, Mother."

"Where?"

"Down-town. I was feeling fine until this damn stick broke—finished up quite a mess, didn't I?"

"We'll soon have you looking fine," she reassured brokenly, "but whatever made you go to the hotel, dear?"

Despite his firm grip of the banister, he was swaying from side to side.

"Felt thirsty, honey."

"But it's madness, utter madness. Surely you realize that now."

"Guess so."

She moved down a step so as to escape his sour breath.

"I want you to promise me something, Gort?"

"What, Mother?"

"That you'll never come home in this condition again—it's so unlike you."

He laughed, and reaching out placed a heavy hand on her shoulder. She felt its moisture through her heavyweight crêpe frock.

"Honey."

"Yes, Gort?"

"Remember what I told you on the night I returned?"

"Every word, dear."

"Explained why I didn't want any callers, didn't I?"

"Hm, hm."

"And how I'd feel about getting around on walking-sticks?"

"That's true."

"Now look at me."

She turned slowly.

"Well?"

"What do you see?"

"I'd hate to tell you."

He drew himself upright.

"That any better, honey?"

"No, Gort, it's not—you're still drunk."

"I've arrived here tight before, though."

"But never like this; your clothes torn, covered in dirt and blood."

"Forgetting something, aren't you?"

"What, dear?"

"Well, those days I came home without every muscle in my body aching." A leer, not a smile, was playing about the crippled man's mouth. "I enjoyed meeting people, too—different story tonight, isn't it?"

"You've got to stand up to these things, Gort," she muttered, pressing her hands together. "I begged you not to enlist again. There was no earthly reason why you should, but, unbeknown to yourself, you'd become a killer, dear—isn't that so?"

"Only partly." Her challenge had sobered him up a little, and a flush showed between the two thin streams of blood

THE DARK ABYSS

running down his face. "If you had said I got a kick out of knocking over Japs and North Koreans, perhaps you'd have something, but there's not a man living who really enjoys war. You've only got to stroll around the lines a few minutes before an attack begins to understand what I mean. Everyone looks scared, some downright afraid, yet war gives a man something, Mother. Maybe it's the comradeship, or perhaps it's just that savage instinct for freedom which cries out in every one of us to be preserved." The speaker smiled. "If the Commos ever gain control of this world, you'll know what I'm talking about, Mother. Meanwhile, I'm getting me a shower and a change of clothes."

Mrs. Saunders did not embarrass her son by waiting till he'd climbed the stairs; instead, she returned to the kitchen, and after collecting a bottle of mercurochrome, together with a pair of scissors and some bandages, moved towards the bathroom.

They were unusually quiet over dinner; Gort only picked at the appetizing second course placed before him and later declined a small plate of delicious-looking strawberries, with a detached "Don't think I will, honey."

Sobered by a cold shower and greatly refreshed after a change of clothes, he now sat waiting for his coffee, the while he kept fingering that long strip of Elastoplast which stretched from brow to jawbone. Occasionally he had been made conscious of his mother's gaze, but for the past five minutes he had been intent on rolling a morsel of bread into a little ball. Satisfied, he placed it on the tablecloth and was about to fire at a pepper-shaker when Mrs. Saunders asked:

"Ready for your coffee, dear?"

"Sure could do with it," he said, looking up. "Got one heck of a head."

"Which only goes to prove whisky doesn't agree with you," she reminded, moving over to the stove. "Where did you fall, Gort?"

"Only about a hundred yards from here."

"Did anyone see you?"

"Jim Massey did."

"He helped you up, I suppose?"

"Well, someone had to, Mother."

"Wish it had been anyone but him, though," Mrs. Saunders ventured on her way to the table. "He sits right behind me at church. Never did like the fellow—talks too much."

Gort, a queer grin riding his mouth, watched his mother pour the coffee, and on leaning forward to take the cup, asked:

"How many bucks have we in the bank, honey?"

"Over ten thousand." She was reaching for the sugar.

"Why, dear?"

"I want to make a business proposition with you."

"Don't be silly, darling. Whatever I have is yours—you know that."

"And appreciate it, too," he said, placing both hands on the table and tilting his chair back. "For weeks I've been thinking of going some place—only for a year or two, of course, but just couldn't decide where. One day it was Mexico, the next South America. Now everything's very clear. With your help I plan to leave for the New Hebrides next week."

She was in the act of sipping the hot black fluid, but at the last part of his sentence she lifted her head quickly:

"The New Hebrides? Oh, Gort, do be serious!"

"What makes you think I'm not?"

She placed aside her cup, then gave him a long despairing scrutiny. Tears were gathering in her eyes when she asked:

"Is it really necessary for you to leave Two Springs, dear?"

"Absolutely imperative."

"But why?"

"Because I want to do something with my life—I can't attempt it here."

"What's stopping you, though?"

"Pride, for one thing; lack of incentive, another."

"And who's going to look after you?"

"Myself."

She sat for a time gazing towards one of the partly opened windows through which the night wind blew cold and damp. Presently she spoke:

"What are you running away from, Gort?"

"That's where you're wrong," he said, spreading out his hands on the table. "Going to Vila is the most courageous thing I've ever done."

Her damp eyes were turned on him.

"Where is Vila, dear?"

"In the New Hebrides."

"And where are they?"

"It's a small group about 1,800 miles from Australia."

"But why go there? You've no friends, not a soul to care tuppence what happens to you."

His right hand went out and closed over her left.

"Ever been off your food for about a week, honey? Had a bad cold, bilious attack, or something, then suddenly found yourself craving a certain dish?"

"Do believe I have."

"That's how I feel about Vila." He paused to smile. "I've a lot of little pieces to gather up, Mother, and if I search for the next twenty years I'll not find them here; so why not let me follow my hunch—better still, come along, too?"

"You know I couldn't do that," she muttered, fighting bravely to master the tremor of her lips. "There's your father's grave to be looked after, this house, and numerous other duties which demand I remain in Two Springs. Your future and my life is here—you know it is, Gort."

"Yours perhaps, but not mine, Mother."

She sighed, and after closing the window turned.

"Mr. Leckie called this afternoon."

"What about?"

"Your old job—wanted to know when you'd be ready to start."

"You told him how things were, I suppose."

"Without going into detail. He was really upset."

"That's mighty big of him."

"Please don't be so bitter, Gort."

"Can't help it, Mother—do you know what happened this afternoon?"

"No."

"While I was sitting in Hollis Park, a football stopped within a few yards of me. One of the kids, Jenny's nephew it turned out, came over and asked me to kick it back—sure was a great moment."

"Jenny's nephew?" Mrs. Saunders appeared intent on packing up the dishes, yet she was watching Gort from under hooded lids. "That must have been Buster—fine boy, isn't he?"

"Nice kid."

"But how came you knew who he was?"

"I didn't until Jenny arrived on the scene."

"Oh!" She was fumbling nervously with the plates. "Rather a difficult situation for both of you, wasn't it?"

"Very."

"What did you do?"

"Tried to make a get-away."

"But recognizing you, she followed, eh?"

"Yes—caught me near the gate."

Smiling sadly, Mrs. Saunders moved around the table. Ever since her last interview with Gort's ex-fiancée she had nursed the hope of their coming together again. Jenny had been so humble and, apart from mentioning her impending divorce, had stated: "There's nothing I wouldn't do if I could wipe out the past seven years, Ma. I still love Gort, always will, yet fools like me don't deserve another chance." Mrs. Saunders had pondered a great deal over these words; they followed her now as she walked towards that stern-faced man at the door.

"Let's go into the lounge," she said, linking her arm in his. "The washing-up can wait; we've such a lot to talk about!"

They had been seated around a roaring log fire for some minutes before the mother asked:

"How do you feel about Jenny Lynne, dear?"

He took up a packet of cigarettes from the arm-rest of his chair, sat staring down at it.

"Didn't bring me in here to discuss her, did you, Mother?"

"I thought it might be an idea."

"Why?"

"Loved her once, didn't you?"

"I did—a long time ago."

"If I said she was still in love with you, what would you say?"

"Not a thing."

"But you're thinking a lot, aren't you?"

"Not about her."

"Gort?"

"Yes."

"Please don't fiddle with that packet—I'm trying to get things straight between us."

He lit a cigarette, then glanced her way:

"Between us—or Jenny and me?"

Her eyes dropped from under his cold stare.

"I want you to be very honest with me, Gort."

"I am."

"But didn't meeting Jenny this afternoon influence your decision to leave here?"

"No."

"Then what did?"

"Being as I am," he said, throwing the empty packet into the fire. "If I stick around Two Springs I'll probably end up getting tight a couple of nights a week. That's going to hurt you and make an ass of me, isn't it? On the other hand, I'm confident of doing something for myself in Vila—always did have a hankering to go there one day."

She shuddered and held her palms towards the fire's heat, like a woman chilled right through:

"I don't think your going there has any merit," she muttered presently. "For one thing; you're far from well, anyone can see that. Then again, what do you know about the New Hebrides?—nothing, nothing at all."

He spoke from behind a smoke-cloud:

"We were about to land there in '43, honey; got right into the harbour, then steamed out again. Ended up landing in Australia. Vila looked pretty good to me."

"But that was war-time, Gort. You had money to burn, good health and thousands of your own countrymen for company. You'll find everything very different now."

"Sure I will."

"Then why not settle here for another six months? This rushing into things usually proves to be most unwise."

He sighed and flicked a speck of cigarette ash from his old blue-tweed sports coat:

"In short, you don't like my idea?"

"No, dear, I don't. For a while you require a lot of attention, good food, plenty of rest, and something to banish those complexes building up inside you. You've no reason to feel ashamed, Gort. One can't do much more for his country than you did, and if there's any honour to be had from war, surely it's yours."

He reached for her hand, squeezed it tightly:

"That's a very pretty speech, honey, but a man can't help being what he is. Sitting here now, I'm unable to say whether it's shame or shattered pride that's eating me up, yet something's playing merry hell with my courage." The speaker grinned. "I've got nothing against Two Springs or the people here, nor if I could help myself would I leave. It's—it's one of those things I can't explain. I'm like a guy who's hanging on to the edge of a precipice with his strength giving out—he simply must let go and take a chance."

She slid from her chair and with hands clasped sat gazing into the fire. Its heat seemed of no avail against the chill of her heart. One, two minutes passed before she glanced

back at him, followed ceilingwards the little puffs of smoke issuing from his lips.

"I want to be perfectly clear about one thing, Gort."

"What, Mother?"

"Jenny Lynne—have you no feelings left for her?"

His eyes were still fixed on the little French clock.

"Apart from you, honey, I've no feelings for any woman."

"And Vila—you're still set on going there?"

"I must—that's if you can help me."

"How, dear?"

"By advancing me nine thousand dollars against my pension. I'll—"

"Of course I will."

He took in a deep breath but did not speak, yet Mrs. Saunders knew by his silence and the firm set of his jaw that her son was as near breaking down as she'd seen him since his childhood. He didn't even demur when a moment later she rose and pressed his white face against her heaving breasts.

It was after lunch the following day when Sam, in his Sunday suit, approached Gort, who sat under a tree in the garden, studying a somewhat tattered Air Force map which ten minutes before he had spread out on a bridge table.

"How do, son?" Murphy greeted. "Doin' a bit of studyin', eh?"

One of Gort's fingers remained on a group of islands that showed as small brown specks on the light-blue sheet.

"Kind of," he said, "giving this old map of the South-West Pacific a regular going-over. Sit down, old-timer."

Sam did so, and while getting out his pipe leaned forward:

"Forgot to bring me glasses, I did. What's that place your finger's on?"

"The New Hebrides—know anything about them?"

The gardener shook his white head:

"To be honest, I'd never heard of 'em—until yesterday—small, ain't they?"

"The Pacific Ocean's a mighty big place, Sam—that's Vila there, see."

Sam bent over the map; excitement was surging right through him, but he was doing his best to keep it in check. He knew what he had in mind was the darndest thing he'd ever done, but, since Mrs. Saunders' visit of last night he'd given the matter much thought. Until near dawn he had sat

smoking and thinking, yet immediately on making the big decision a strange peace had settled upon the old man's lonely heart. This, he felt, was a mission passed on to him from the Supreme Being, and come what may he must accept it. His voice held a new quality when at last he glanced up.

"Your Ma tells me you're thinkin' of going there, lad." He watched a glint of suspicion glide into his companion's eyes, remain for a moment, then disappear as if brushed quickly aside by an all-consuming conviction.

"Reckon I'm quite mad, don't you, Sam?"

"Did at first, son."

"And now?"

"Well, you might have somethin'."

Gort's gaze came away from the blue sheet and, half turning, he stared straight at his companion.

"So it was you whom Mother visited last night, eh?"

"We had a long talk."

"What about?"

"You, lad—you and other things." The gardener lit his pipe, sighed and continued: "On the day after you arrived home somethin' you said kinda set me thinkin'. We were standing over there near the front gate when I mentioned that, bad as it was, you did survive—remember what you came back at me with?"

"Yes, Sam." Hard lines were pulling at the corners of the cripple's mouth. "I said only a part of me returned."

"Exactly," Sam rejoined, running a finger along the deep crease of his recently pressed blue serge trousers. "Couldn't quite get what you were driving at then, but I do now."

Gort sat for a while gazing across the yard. When next he met the older man's eyes anger had squeezed out every vestige of colour from his face.

"So Mother told you the whole works, eh?"

"She was a mighty worried woman, son. Couldn't sleep for thinking of you packing up and leaving here."

"But that doesn't justify her telling anyone about my——"

"Look here," Sam interrupted quietly, "you've got things all wrong. Your Ma didn't come to my place looking for sympathy, or to discuss anything to do with your wounds. She called because I've known you since you were in short pants and thought I might be able to talk you out of making this trip. Naturally, I asked a lot of questions, wanted to know this and that. In the end she ups and tells me—not annoyed about her talking to your old buddy, are you?"

"Sure I'm annoyed."

"But you won't say anything to her, will you?"

"Not much."

"Why not listen to what I have in mind first?"

"I'm listening."

For a time Sam sucked thoughtfully at his pipe. Emotion was getting the better of him again and he felt quite inadequate to fight against it. Since the dawn ghosts had been hovering around him. Three sailors and a smiling-faced woman kept drifting out of the past, bringing with them all the memories, joys and pain of a lifetime. They were urging him to speak, but his throat felt so——

From afar he heard Gort's cold voice:

"Mother told you about my having another fall, too, I suppose?"

"Hm, hm."

"And my meeting Jenny?"

"Everything, lad, everything——"

"That's swell."

"Wouldn't feel too badly about it if I were you."

"Who, Jenny?"

"No, your Ma. She thought she was doin' right, and as things 'ave turned out I'm certain something more than just a troubled heart brought her to my place last night."

Gort's gaze returned quickly to the other's face; bitter words were on his lips, but on seeing tears in the old man's eyes, he whispered:

"What do you think made her call, Sam?"

"God, maybe."

"Why God?"

"Because without His help yer won't get anywhere, son."

"Couldn't be much worse than the way I am, old-timer."

"Don't you believe it! Here you have a mother, good home and friends. That's much more than you'll arrive in Vila with——right, ain't I?"

"I'll have nine thousand good American dollars."

"They won't get you very far. Costs a lot of money even to live these days. Anyway, what do you aim on doin'?"

"Throwing away those damned sticks."

"Then what?"

"Look around for something to do."

"Really determined about having a go at the New Hebrides, ain't you?"

"Would you like to know why?"

"Sure would."

"Because lately I find myself becoming far too interested in that old Winchester Dad bought me years ago. Hardly a night passes without my slipping a few cartridges into its breech—bad sign, isn't it?"

"Rotten way for a young feller to die, though," Sam said, rising and taking a few steps across the lawn. "I agree it takes a lot of guts to go on when everythin' seems stacked against yer, but everyone of us owes somethin' to God, even if it's just the will to hang on. I think so, anyway."

Gort laughed quietly.

"That's where we differ."

The old man turned slowly:

"Don't believe in God any longer, eh?"

"Haven't for a long time—not since those first terrible days at Iwo Jima." The speaker shrugged. "One can't watch his friends being blown to pieces or mowed down by the dozen and still believe in the Deity."

"I do, son."

"Then I envy you."

"By the look in your eyes I'd say you was sorry for me."

Gort did not commit himself; instead, he picked up a red pencil and began following one of the sea routes marked on the map. He had reached Tahiti when Sam spoke:

"Any particular reason for you decidin' on Vila?"

The pencil went on, stopped at a tiny island that bore the name of Raitiere.

"I knew a guy once," Gort said presently; "we were at Duke together. During the war Curley Ross had the job of building an air-strip there—he reckoned it was about the last place this side of hell."

Sam chuckled well down in his throat.

"Hardly call that a recommendation, would you?"

"It's the way I want it," the other answered, folding his map with meticulous care. "You can have your cities and all this so-called American luxury, but I'm heading for a little backwater where, according to Curley, a man could crawl along on his belly and no one would turn a hair; or have his throat cut just as easily as drinking a glass of beer." The cripple smiled. "As I visualize Vila, the going will be mighty tough, yet I can't get out of my head that something's waiting for me there—worth taking a look-see, don't you think?"

A few added wrinkles showed on Sam's deeply furrowed brow, but his blue eyes were smiling when he stirred to speak.

"After your Ma left last night the five of us had a kinda conference, son. We were all in the lounge: Mary Lou, Paul, Timothy, Peter and me—near two o'clock young Peter sort of got very quiet, so I said to him: 'What's wrong, little guy?' Often called him by that name, remember?" The speaker sighed, waited for his puzzled listener to nod, then continued as if choosing every word: " 'I wouldn't try to talk Gort out of going to Vila, Dad,' he told me. 'I can appreciate Mrs. Saunders' point of view; she wants him to remain at Two Springs. But no woman, not even a mother, understands how a fellow feels when he's condemned to walking around on sticks for life.' " Sam laughed almost noiselessly. "Know what the young beggar ups and tells me then?"

"No, old-timer, I don't."

"That here in Two Springs I wasn't much good, nohow. 'What are you doing with your life, Dad?' he says. 'Just mooching around a few gardens, pulling out weeds. We expect bigger things of you; not much sense climbing Strawberry Hill every Sunday to visit Mother's grave; she's not there any more. We're all up here in this world of clouds, watching and loving you, Dad. For years now we've followed you to church, dried your damp eyes as you knelt in prayer, sympathized with you in your lonely existence, but that's all past now. You have a work to do. Gort was our friend; don't let him go to Vila alone; he needs someone like you—you need him, too. Half your trouble down below is brought about by man's inability to see things as we do up here. Your path through the future is already defined. It's not one across which stardust falls, or twilight softens, but you've got to do it, Dad.' "

Visibly affected, Gort lit a cigarette, sat there blowing quick puffs of smoke into the bright autumn sunlight. Soon he would get to his feet and say something, attempt to express what he felt, but not yet awhile. Sam's words seemed to have brought the sky closer, and in the centre of that huge white cloud he perceived a countenance, a very beautiful countenance. It seemed to be looking right at him.

The old man's voice was very gentle.

"I—I talked things over with your Ma as soon as I got here. She's all for it now, so what say we drive into Nashville directly and see what we can do about arranging our passages? I've got forty thousand dollars—you've nine thousand—that makes us kinda secure, doesn't it?"

Still Gort did not move. That noble countenance was fading

now, melting slowly like pure white snow under sunlight. For a while he was conscious of a great sadness. Then as quickly an emotion allied to elation gripped him, yet it was not quite the same. The warmth welling up from the pit of his stomach was something new, came only to those lucky few who have glimpsed the face of God.

Mrs. Saunders had been waiting in her car outside the Nashville Tourist Bureau for well over an hour when she noticed both men making their way across the street.

"Well," she asked, throwing open the door, "how did you get on?"

"We're in for it now," Sam answered, taking Gort's sticks and placing them in the back seat. "At first it didn't seem as though we'd get no place. 'Vila,' they said. 'Never heard of it.' Then our young friend here gets kinda hot under the collar, demanded they phone Frisco, with the result"—the speaker gave a little grin—"hate to tell you this, Mrs. Saunders, but seems as though Gort and me will be quitting the good old United States on Thursday. Bit sudden, ain't it?"

She felt the seat sink under the weight of her son's body and a moment later heard him close the side door—its faint click sounded unusually loud to her.

When Sam had called just after lunch and explained his plan, she had felt as if a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders, but at the words, "quitting on Thursday," fear's cold hand had pushed against her heart, and notwithstanding a brave attempt to repulse it, the feeling persisted as she sat there waiting for some comment from Gort.

"We had no alternative, honey," he said, as she reached for the ignition key. "If we hadn't booked on the *Comte du Pont* there's no telling how long we'd have to wait."

"It's—it's a French boat," she heard herself say. "What size, dear?"

"Quite small, carries only fourteen passengers and cargo."

"Oh!" Mrs. Saunders' lips were quivering slightly as she started the motor, but Sam's reassuring voice helped to bolster up her crumbling morale.

"Of course, there's every chance of our arrivin' back within a year—depends on Vila, don't it, Gort?"

The woman stole a quick glance at her son's face; it looked more youthful, and his eyes seemed less confused than she had seen them for weeks.

"I'm going to get me two good legs out of this trip,

Mother," he said. "Two good legs and a tummy full of courage. With Sam to help me I can't fail."

She was driving along the busy street in a mist of her own tears. On looking at Gort a few seconds before, memories potent as old wine had seeped through her mind. She saw him in many phases: the child on his way to school for the first time, skipping along by her side, a small leather case in his right hand, a bunch of flowers in the other; Gort the boy, helping his father in the garden; Gort home from college, coming down the stairs three at a time for breakfast and saying: "Morning, honey-child, what's cooking?"; Gort at his father's burial service, grown up overnight, whispering: "Steady there, Mother, steady!" The three of them, Jenny, Gort and herself out driving, Gort home on final leave. The heartache of what might-have-been, a last good-bye, then watching him walk towards the taxi. Gort, his face much leaner, tighter, harder, standing with ten other returned servicemen on the Nashville railroad station, while the crowd cheered and a band played *My Old Kentucky Home*. All these things came back to her now, came back with a force that hurt. "I'll get me two good legs out of this and a tummy full of courage." The words repeated themselves in her mind until she wanted to scream.*

Sam broke the silence:

"I'll arrange for Harry Vine and his wife to move into my place—they're a nice young couple."

Mrs. Saunders nodded in agreement, then heard her son's voice:

"How do you feel about everything, Mother?"

"Fine."

"Think I'm doing the right thing, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Honest?"

"Cross my heart."

"That's swell," he murmured, patting her on the knee. "I knew you'd understand, honey."

CHAPTER XI

A CHANCE visitor to Vila on this lovely April morning would have wondered what was responsible for the activity which since seven o'clock had been going on along the waterfront. Groups of children, New Hebrideans, Tonkinese and Chinese could have been seen walking along the Rue Higginson carrying huge bunches of flowers that in any city florist's would have fetched a fabulous figure.

Hibiscus, frangipanni, wild violets and camellias pressed against the youngsters' dark, uncovered chests, had brought a wondrous splash of colour to this erstwhile drab fore-shore. Their faces, too, must surely have added to one's astonishment as, aglow with excitement, their eager young owners gathered on the wharf talking in a mixture of unfamiliar tongues.

This unusual sight alone would have been sufficient to justify enquiring what was happening, but at seven-thirty when practically the whole European adult population began arriving in cars, afoot, or on bikes, fuel was quickly added to the already bright flames of curiosity, for only on very rare occasions do the few English families who reside in Vila condescend to mix openly with their more numerous French neighbours.

This, however, happened to be one of those eventful moments, for everyone from the British Resident Commissioner's wife to the most lowly native loved Angélique Balant, and this morning she was coming home. Soon now the *Commissionnaire Renommée* would slip into the harbour, and those lucky few who owned or could afford to hire a boat would go out and meet that delightful young woman, whom the English referred to as "irresistible," the French as "sympathique."

Excited voices echoed along the waterfront when at exactly eight-thirty the *Commissionnaire Renommée* poked her sleek white bows around Devil's Point's high, forbidding cliffs. The murmur rose to a roar when twenty minutes later the metallic sound of anchor chains unwinding rang across the water.

Monsieur Nebrac, who for the past half-hour had stood on the bridge of his luxurious yacht, studying the milling crowd through binoculars, spoke to his companion, a tall, heavily shouldered young man with unusually thick lips and a mop of flaming red hair.

"Ah, it is terrible; even now he has not arrived—here, see for yourself."

Dave Brown took the glasses without comment. An Australian, he had arrived in Vila only six months ago as the Condominion's chief radio operator, and as yet had not felt the sting of either its boredom or its slander, which was said to have broken the spirit of his unfortunate predecessor.

"I believe you're right," he said, handing the binoculars back. "What could have happened?"

"I can't understand it," the French High Commissioner replied, running a handkerchief round his thick sweat-stained neck. "For Angélique he would do anything. Oh, M'sieur, wait till you see her. She is very beautiful, yet her father, he does not come—it is all so strange."

Dave Brown, more amused than concerned, laughed:

"Is she attached?"

"Attached?"

"Yes—engaged?"

"Oh, that." Monsieur Nebrac, glasses glued to his eyes, was still studying the crowd. "As far as I know, Angélique has never been interested in men. Her love she shares with everyone, but her heart, my friend, is reserved for Dr. Balant."

"Is she blonde or brunette?"

"Neither—her skin has the tint of ripening corn, her hair, black as a raven's wing, is fine as silken threads. Then there are her eyes, green as jade when caught by sunlight—satisfied, Monsieur?"

Abashed by his companion's tone, Brown lit a cigarette. He pondered well before asking the next question:

"Queer fellow, the doctor, don't you think?"

"After you've lived here a little longer," the High Commissioner said, allowing the glasses to rest on their straps, "you might begin to understand what this place is capable of doing to men like Monsieur Balant. I've been in Vila only three years and in that time I've watched at least half a dozen men return to their homes broken beyond repair. Malaria is one of the worst dangers, the climate another, but——" He smiled. "Ah, well, you'll find out, my friend."

The other's thick lips framed a half-smile.

"Trying to frighten me, are you?"

"No, just giving you some friendly advice."

"You have in mind Webster, my predecessor, I suppose."

"He and others."

"But poor Larry got caught up with one of the native women here. Between her and the grog he didn't stand a chance."

"M'sieur?"

"Yes."

"Immediately on arriving in Vila, whom did you call on?"

"The British Resident Commissioner."

"Exactly." The little Frenchman lifted his plump hands.

"And what did His Excellency tell you?"

"About Larry Webster's slide down hill."

"Is that all?"

"A few other things; nothing really important, though."

"The club over there, he warned you against frequenting it, too often, I suppose?"

"Quite so."

"And loneliness—shortage of women, etc."

"He did touch on those."

"Yet you shrugged and said there was nothing to worry about?"

Brown laughed.

"Apparently you've been talking to Sir George."

"My wife and I were at his place only last night, M'sieur."

"Comparing notes, eh?"

"No, playing cards."

"During which I was discussed, presumably."

"Very briefly."

"Then how do you know what the Commissioner and I talked about?"

"Because with all new-comers we follow the same pattern, M'sieur. Remember, I act for the French Government as he for the British, consequently our advice to strangers is practically identical."

"I get you," Brown said, taking a packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. "So, irrespective of who it is, you both recite the same lines—having got through the formalities of 'How-do-you-do' sort of thing, you settle down to the job of trying to make a cove feel that he's landed himself in a mad-house." The speaker smiled easily. "Frankly, I think

Vila's all right, apt to get one down now and again, but everything considered it's not too bad."

"Then you're happy here?"

"Why not? I'm getting well paid, have a boy who looks after me like a king, excellent food, decent quarters, plus——"

"A certain married woman whom you visit every Wednesday afternoon round three o'clock—isn't that so?"

Brown's big frame straightened quickly. He threw a startled glance at his companion, but Monsieur Nebrac was again busy with the glasses.

"Better retract that"—the voice, though a trifle uncertain, held a threat—"before I lose my temper."

The Frenchman was watching Doctors Clévite and Anderson being helped from the official launch. Not till they had boarded the *Commissionaire Renommée* did he speak:

"I retract nothing, my friend, and what's more, I resent your tone. Please calm down."

Brown was moving forward.

"Want to know something?"

"What, Monsieur?"

"Unless you apologize for that nasty crack—quickly, too—I'll chuck you overboard."

His companion's moon-shaped face broke into a confident smile:

"I would think twice before indulging in such horseplay, M'sieur. I'm short of stature, but in my day was regarded as an excellent wrestler. Is there not a chance, therefore, of my reversing the order? What's more, I'm only trying to save your life."

"My life?"

"Precisely. You see, Madame Pellière's husband is a very jealous man and——"

"That doesn't mean a thing to me."

"I don't think you're being exactly honest with yourself, or are you just a fool, M'sieur? Vila is a small place, and naturally your visits to Madame Pellière's ménage have been noted—otherwise how should I know of them?"

Brown licked the tiny pinpoints of sweat from his upper lip before speaking:

"But just because I call on a woman——"

"So at last you admit it."

"Well, yes, I——"

"Then I would advise you not to visit her again," the High Commissioner warned, with a careless lift of his shoulders.

"I realise the lady in question is greatly attracted to men, particularly new-comers, but her poor husband is so much in love that he is blind. So far, however, I have managed to keep his wife's indiscretions away from him." The speaker laughed quietly. "We French are a funny lot where morals are concerned, M'sieur; much more broadminded than you English, yet there's a limit to all things, and my patience is running out—consequently Madame Pellière has had her last chance—which also is yours. Do I make myself perfectly clear, M'sieur?"

Brown glared down at the little runt of a man. He was both annoyed and scared. One second he felt prompted to reach out and push him in the face, tell him to mind his own damned business, but he knew he wouldn't. The fellow had him trapped all right; and seeing he'd grown tired of Madame Pellière, it really didn't matter. Presently he smiled.

"Well, that's that. What say we go over and meet M'amselle Balant?"

"I'm sorry." The Commissioner pointed to a small boat nearing his yacht. "You were invited here for one purpose; it has been served, and now my boys are waiting to take you to the wharf—good day, M'sieur."

For a second it appeared certain that Brown would knock the admonisher down. His right hand closed and swung back, but even while poising his huge body to deliver the blow he heard a cool voice say:

"M'sieur Nebrac, how are you, how are you?"

The Frenchman swung round; muttered a startled "Mon Dieu," then, without glancing at Brown, rushed towards the opposite rail, over which a girlish figure in a pastel-blue two-piece swimsuit was being assisted by a dozen eager hands. "Angélique," he cried, "Angélique! How on earth did you get here?"

"I give you one big surprise," she laughed, gripping his hands and leaning back so as to miss nothing of her friend's astonishment. "Time, everything, it goes so slow and I get impatient of waiting for a medical inspection, so I swim."

"Ah, but that is dangerous, Angélique; the harbour it is full of sharks, and your life it is so precious—you make me tremble—see."

"The big fish, they do not worry me, M'sieur." Her voice, low, husky, struck the ears like a bass harp-string when fingered by an expert. "Two years is a long time for me

to——” She paused and, after taking in all the admiring faces turned her way, added: “My Poppa, where is he?”

“Waiting on the wharf,” the High Commissioner lied, releasing the girl’s cool hands. “Can’t pick him out from here, though.”

“Then I go to him.”

“Whenever you’re ready, my——” The words on Nebrac’s lips faded to an inaudible whisper when, without warning, Angélique laughed, and dived over the side.

Anxious eyes followed the girl’s figure as it moved quickly through the clear, blue water. She swam without effort, her small feet and brown arms making hardly a ripple as, working in perfect co-ordination, they carried their lovely owner shoreward.

Not until she had reached the wharf did Monsieur Nebrac appear to draw breath, but now he inhaled deeply and, while mopping a perspiring brow, addressed Dave Brown, who stood leaning against the rail:

“I’ve another suggestion to make, my friend.”

The radio operator grinned.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about,” he said. “She’s a bit above my class. Another thing, I like them older—don’t you?” So saying, he brushed his indignant host aside and stepped into the waiting launch.

.

It took Angélique well over twenty minutes to pass through the enthusiastic crowd, and by then her arms were aching under their burden of flowers. To every greeting she asked: “My Poppa, have you seen him?” but her white, brown and black-skinned admirers had for some reason ignored the question.

Though deeply disappointed, she had so far managed to hide her perplexity. Now, however, as she noticed the delicate face of a boy smiling up at her from under an oversized topee, she gave a sharp cry of alarm, and going down on one knee opened wide her arms.

“Little Butch,” she whispered. “Little Butch.”

His quivering lips had been pressed against the girl’s neck for some seconds before his muffled words reached her:

“It is so good to see you again, Angélique—so very good.”

She sighed and, forcing him from her, asked:

“You have been sick, darling?”

“No.”

"Then how is it you do not grow?"

"Perhaps it is because I'm always to remain small," the child said, running caressing hands through his companion's damp hair, "but we not talk about it now. Your father, he's waiting at home, Angélique—we must go now."

Since his mother, the widow of an Indian Army officer, settled in Vila six years before, little Butch had won something of a reputation for himself. Known as the best "fixer" in the New Hebrides, this unusually handsome boy could be relied on to organize almost anything. If, for instance, you decided to go fishing but lacked both gear and boat, a few words to him would result in the trip being arranged to the most minute detail. At a stated time you would be called for by a taxi, taken to a spot on the waterfront and assisted into a well-stocked outrigger. Then little Butch, in complete charge, would begin to stagger you with his easy conversation and knowledge of marine life.

Lunch-time would see him produce a basket of wafer-like sandwiches, then even before your subconscious mind began to conjure up visions closely associated with a glass of cold beer, he'd take a bottle of lager from a bag filled with ice-cubes, and say, "Seeing M'sieur enjoyed those sandwiches, perhaps he'd like a drink."

Always smiling and ready to lend a hand, little Butch had endeared himself to the people of Vila. Speaking his own tongue with the diction of a well-educated boy, he was equally at home in the company of French, Tonkinese, Chinese and local natives. In talking to this very lovable character, one found it difficult to believe that his big heart had been broken before its young owner had turned eight years of age.

On arriving in Vila with her son, Mrs. White had proved to be an ideal mother, intelligent, not unattractive; and being an excellent needlewoman, she had catered for the wants of the English and French ladies' taste in fashion. By 1948, in fact, little Butch's mother had done so well with her small dressmaking salon on the Rue Carnot that she thought of sending him to school in Sydney. Unfortunately, however, on the very day she had received application papers from the principal of the Scots College, Jake Larkins' small evil-smelling lugger had entered Vila harbour.

Drunkard, blackmailer, thug and standover man, compelled to quit Tahiti and adjacent islands in fear of his worthless life, he had decided to take refuge in the New Hebrides until

things quietened down. A giant of a man, with jet black curly hair and dark piercing eyes set far too close to a badly flattened nose, Larkins looked what he was—a type who asked no favours from life and gave none.

How the unfortunate Mrs. White first met this piece of human jetsam is still obscure. Some say he just walked into her dressmaking salon, while others are quite as certain they had known each other in India years before. Whatever the answer, their association spelt tragedy for little Butch and his mother.

Within a month Mrs. White lost interest in her child, her dignity and business. Accompanied by Larkins, she could have been seen practically every night drinking at Madame Journez's hotel. His crude jokes and her drunken laughter were much frowned upon at the time, but when it became common knowledge that Larkins had taken up residence in the Whites' bungalow, voices were raised in disgust.

That was two years ago. Nowadays no one bothered to mention them. Occasionally, when sober, little Butch's mother ventured into the shopping area, but she did so reluctantly, for experience had made her regret the past. Too late now, though, for at forty-five she was destroyed. Disease had taken pathetic toll of her once shapely legs; they moved slowly, one foot dragging behind the other, as if it were not part of her poor, rotting body.

With a tolerance and devotion rarely found in a child, little Butch had assumed the responsibility of looking after this ill-starred pair. In between attending to the wants of his mother and the brute he called "Sir," the lad had somehow managed to meet the household accounts by offering his organizing ability to anyone requiring his services.

It was because of the child's tragic background that Angélique had befriended him. Even while in Paris she had not failed: parcels of clothes, food and books had reached Vila with every ship, yet despite her generosity, malnutrition had already wrought irrevocable harm on this lovable but pathetic character.

Relieved after news of her father, the girl's interest returned to little Butch. Tears filled her eyes as she studied him. There was no youth left in that lovely uplifted face. It had sharpened to almost adult firmness, and around his mouth she noticed tiny lines biting into the boy's tender lips. These things, together with his puny bare shoulders and arms, shocked Angélique, but when during her all-searching scrutiny he was

overcome by a spasm of coughing she drew him to her urgently.

"Oh, what have they done to my little friend!" she cried. "You have lost so much weight, and that cough, it frightens me."

He leant against her heavily.

"It has been with me for some months now, Angélique, but I do not write of it in my letters."

"You should have told me, darling."

"I almost did once," he admitted, behind a devastating smile, "but after reading the page I knew you would be sad, so I tore it up."

She was looking at him through tear-brushed eyes.

"Is your mother still with that horrid man, dear?"

"He has not left us, Angélique."

She was on both knees now, hugging the very breath out of him, but little Butch did not mind, for all affection had passed him by since Angélique's departure for France. Within a few moments, however, the child remembered his mission, hence the quick throw-back of his narrow shoulders.

"We must go now," he said. "M'sieur Balant will be very angry with me if I do not carry out his orders."

She smiled.

"What did my Poppa tell you?"

Momentarily the youngster's eyes were touched with laughter:

"I'm afraid he was a little rude, Angélique."

"Well, come on, I'm quite broadminded."

"But you do not swear."

"I have occasionally—why?"

"Your father did this morning."

"Surely not in your presence."

"Oh, yes, he did." The index finger of little Butch's right hand was playing an imaginary game of noughts and crosses on his listener's oval brow. "Only this morning Alberno called with a message for me to come over and see your father. When I arrived he seemed very angry, so I said: 'Why, M'sieur, are you so cross, when today the whole world is happy?' " The speaker paused to pick up an armful of Angélique's flowers. "Guess what he told me."

"Well, come on, I'm waiting to hear."

"Do you really want to know?"

"Hm, hm."

"‘I’ve not forgotten,’ M’sieur yelled at me, ‘but nothing’s going to drag me down with that mob. Damned hypocrites most of them, anyway, so you’ll hire a taxi and bring Angélique here—don’t be too bloody long about it, either.’"

"Poppa shouldn’t say such things to you," she consoled, following him to the waiting car. "I’ll give him one big scold for using that word."

Their taxi was swinging into Rue Pasteur before it left the crowd of running natives behind. Allowed to relax at last, she leaned back against a cushion of flowers and pressed one of the child’s cold hands.

"Little Butch?"

His eyes were caressing her face like tender fingers.

"Yes."

"We go swimming again soon, eh?"

"Oh, yes, please."

"And have picnics at that lovely spot you discovered in the Valley of Sounds."

"We found it together, Angélique."

"But you reached it first."

He waved his free hand, as if refusing to take any credit away from her, then changed the subject with a somewhat anxious:

"France—you’ll not go back?"

"No, darling."

"Yet in your letters there was so much praise for that place—what’s its name again?"

"The Louvre?"

"No—Champs something?"

"Ah, the Champs Elysées." She laughed. "One day perhaps you go there, eh?"

The child did not answer. He could have given at least two sound reasons why such pleasures would never be his, yet rather than spoil her homecoming he preferred to remain silent.

They were climbing the steepest part of the hill now; modest weatherboard homes surrounded by neat gardens ran off from the narrow gravel road, like furtive white ghosts whose one desire was to escape the intense heat. Not till their car, in low gear, had gained the Rue Picanon did little Butch find his voice:

"The *Comte du Pont* arrived on Tuesday, Angélique—remember it?"

She was sitting forward on the seat, gazing towards her

house which showed through a cluster of dejected-looking palms.

"Quite well. It called here several times in 1948."

"And returned last Tuesday with two passengers."

"Oh, anyone we know?"

"They are strangers," the boy said in sympathetic tones.

"Father and son, I think. One is dangerously ill."

Angélique's eyes did not wander from the green roof of her father's bungalow as she asked:

"What's wrong with him, darling?"

"Polio—they say the poor old man will die."

"How very sad! He's in the French hospital, I suppose."

"No—British."

"They're English people, then?" She was gathering up her flowers in great haste, for their car had turned into Rue d'Alsace Lorraine and would soon be drawing to a halt.

"No, Americans. The son, he is badly crippled, gets around on a walking-stick. I'm so sorry for him."

But Angélique, whose heart at any time could be touched by the distress of others, did not hear her companion's words. The taxi's squeaking brakes were being applied, and she was trembling from head to foot.

"I'll see you later, darling," she called over her shoulder. "There's Poppa coming down the steps—I run, yes."

As his daughter reached the gate, Monsieur Balant's strides lengthened, but within a matter of seconds he, too, was running. The years stood still, swept back; he saw Angélique as a child racing towards him across the beaches of a dozen islands; he felt, too, that old emotion, a mixture of great joy and deep inward pain, as with "Poppa, oh, Poppa!" she threw herself into his hungry arms.

The eyes of both were damp when a minute later she stepped back a pace and looked up at him.

"You do not say one single word to me yet, Poppa—is anything wrong?"

With an effort he steadied his quivering lips.

"For two long years I yearn for this moment, and now it is mine there's a weight on my tongue—but my heart, can you not hear its voice?"

She smiled, pressed her left ear against his chest and listened, spoke from there:

"What does it say, Poppa?"

"That I love you very much." He swallowed hard. "Why,

though, this swimsuit? Where are all those pretty frocks you bought in Paris?"

"In my cabin, Poppa."

"So you swim from the ship, eh?"

"Oh, it is, good; the water is so cool and I cannot wait—you're happy I'm back, yes?"

"Terribly happy." The man's voice was still hushed. "When you left here I lost the art of living, nothing seemed worth while, but now we go back, recapture the warmth and simple little pleasures that once were ours—we must, Angélique."

She was again staring straight at him.

"You do not look very well, Poppa; under your eyes there are dark rings, and your face, it is much thinner—why?"

"Because I'm two years older, my pretty one."

"But next birthday is only your fifty-seventh."

"After the half century a man ages quickly in Vila, dear—study most of them here, and——"

"Poppa?"

"Yes, darling."

"Little Butch, what's his trouble?"

Monsieur Balant's eyes swept towards the taxi, just then coasting past his front gate. He saw a white face pressed against the window, but did not acknowledge the youngster's wistful smile.

"I've not noticed anything amiss with him," he lied. "Granted, little Butch is very small for his age, yet what else could you expect of anyone who lives as he does?—that swine Larkins is still with his mother, you know."

"And Madame White—what of her?"

"She has about six months longer to live."

"To live?"

"Perhaps less."

"Poor thing!" The girl shook her head sadly. "Oh, Poppa, how can some people be so foolish? She was such a nice person once."

"You wouldn't think so now," he said. "In my time I've seen a good many people destroyed, but never anyone so completely as Madame White."

"Is she one of your patients, Poppa?"

"These days I do not practise, Angélique. Most of my life has been spent attending to the unwashed bodies of natives, with their smells and sores, so I've retired—understandable, isn't it?"

"You—you do not treat anyone?"

"Not a soul," he muttered, throwing his arm about her waist, "not a soul."

In silence they gained the veranda. Deep in thought, Angélique did not notice the new seven-piece cane suite bought specially for her homecoming, or Alberno, their house-boy, arranging a huge bowl of flowers on a small glass-top table.

Looking up, the frizzy-haired New Hebridean grinned from ear to ear and spoke in pidgin English:

"Happy come along big ship fast, Missie—flowers pick you, nice?"

She smiled and ran her fingers across the soft hibiscus petals.

"They're very lovely, Alberno."

As the native moved into the house, Monsieur Balant laughed, and in a quick movement opened the *louvres*.

"Your little ship, does it not look small from here, Angélique?"

She walked over to the veranda edge and, like him, stood gazing down at the harbour's sun-kissed waters. Several small barges, their gunwales piled high with copra, had already begun unloading, and from the *Commissionnaire Renommée's* busy decks a boatswain's voice could be heard occasionally above the din of screaming winches. Native canoes, their outriggers decorated with flowers, were making shoreward, while above them a number of young seagulls glided and swooped in search of fish.

"Just before I left Paris I visited Limours," she said, breaking the short silence. "Everything was much the same as you have described No. 27 Rue Hébuterre. Even that huge brass door-knocker is still in use."

The man's mouth tightened:

"Who lives there now, Angélique?"

"A M'sieur Chontaine and his wife. They were so kind, showed me right through the house."

"How does it look, child?"

"Every room did something to me, Poppa; its old-world dignity filled me with a strange sense of loss. Why, I do not know."

He sighed into the hot sunlight.

"My study, you were in it, too, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes—I sat there a long while, talking in whispers to the ghost of a little boy."

"My ghost, eh?"

"He told me such a lot of things," she said in a dreamy, far-away voice. "I cried for you, Poppa."

"Why, my pretty one?"

"Because I could not help it."

He lit the cheroot in his hand, a little too deliberately for a man who merely wants to smoke. Angélique's mention of his old home had stirred within him a chain of memories that slipped through his mind like the thrust of a sword. He was about to change the subject when she stirred:

"Poppa?"

"Well?"

"The girls at Madame Le Chateaudun's finishing school could not understand why I did not have a picture of Mother. When I said they were all lost when our yacht was wrecked, some did not believe me."

"It's perfectly true," he muttered, squaring his thin shoulders. "Anyway, I'd rather not talk of your mother; you know how I feel about her."

She half turned, facing him.

"Hate for a dead woman is evil, though, Poppa—why must you be this way?"

"Have I not told you often enough?"

"Very little, Poppa."

"Then let what I've said be sufficient."

"You are angry with me?"

"Only when you question me about your mother," he answered, meeting her gaze for the first time in minutes. "One day, no doubt, circumstances will force me to justify my hatred, but until then I'm not prepared to discuss anything even remotely associated with the past. It is best for both of us that way, child."

A little shiver passed through Angélique. Something in her father's eyes troubled the girl, yet a moment later when he rubbed his unsteady hands together and said: "Now for a welcome-home drink, my dear," she gave a quick smile and followed him across the veranda.

CHAPTER XII

THROUGH the window he had watched masses of colours competing on the eastern horizon. Shell-pink had followed the dawn, had spread itself slowly over that breathless flush of silver, only to be infused and edged five minutes later with streaks of gold. For a while everything had remained in these dual shades, spread like a gorgeous transparent gown draped slowly along the path of the dawn goddess, then suddenly the timidity of pastel hues was replaced by definite colours: vermilion, old-rose, orange and mauve gained control, merged, broadened, lengthened, until most of the eastern sky seemed overburdened with crimson glory.

Owing to the efforts of Lady Gollan, the British Resident Commissioner's wife, a room had been made available for Gort at the hospital, yet this gesture, much appreciated as it was, had failed in its purpose.

When only a day's sailing from Vila Sam had caught a chill and later complained of feeling off colour. Gort, however, had not been unduly concerned. Until then they had enjoyed every minute of the voyage. In Papeete a wonderful thing had happened. One night while the two friends were sitting in the Col Bleu watching a group of lovely brown-skinned Tahitian girls going through a routine of hip and hand movements to the accompaniment of a native orchestra, Gort had finished off his beer and said enthusiastically: "Wouldn't like to bet me ten dollars I'll walk out of here leaving one of these sticks behind, would you?" At which Sam had placed a fifty-dollar bill on the table and challenged: "Cover it, son."

An hour later he had stood by, and with his big heart thumping madly watched Gort moving towards the exit with the assistance of a single walking-stick. So the first stage of the voyage had achieved undreamed-of results. Visiting strange ports, lounging in canvas chairs, submitting their bodies to the hot South Pacific sun, standing on deck at night, gazing up at a sky in which pale stars gleamed while moonlight flooded every inch of the ocean's gently heaving breast. Little

wonder, with Vila less than two hundred miles away, that the younger man, absorbed in a new kind of complacency, did not feel alarmed when on the Monday morning Sam suggested remaining in bed until lunch-time.

On returning to their cabin round ten o'clock with a cup of tea for his friend, Gort became anxious. A flush of fever showed on Sam's face and his bloodshot eyes held that glassy look of unused agates. From then on all had been confusion. An urgent radio call to Vila for hospital accommodation. Captain Bouchier's words: "What a pity we do not carry a doctor, M'sieur! Of course, it might only be malaria, yet the symptoms are not quite the same."

Vila—transferring the unconscious Sam into a waiting launch, accompanying him to hospital, pacing up and down before a door marked "Isolation Ward," hours later seeing a grim-jawed young Australian doctor walking towards him and hearing the dread verdict: "Polio, my dear chap. There's no doubt about it now. Tragedy is, we don't possess an iron lung in this place; been fighting for one for over a year now—terribly damned sorry, Saunders."

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, old Sam had continued to fight hard for this thing called life, fought while Gort roamed around the small palm-fringed island like a lost soul. Had this happened back home, he would have been distressed—he'd always been very attached to Sam—but for over sixty terrible hours his conscience was beset by the undeniable fact that, but for him, their old gardener's life would not have been in jeopardy. Consequently, since Monday Gort's head had not touched a pillow, nor a razor his face.

Dreadful he looked now as Sister Almond, a somewhat severe-looking young woman in her early thirties, approached. Hearing footsteps, Gort swung round:

"Well, Sister," he asked, "how's the battle going?"

She gave a tired smile and, after placing Sam's chart on a chipped enamel traymobile, spoke in a pleasant, well-modulated voice:

"Badly, I'm sorry to say, Mr. Saunders, very badly."

"He's not——"

"No, but I don't think the poor old chap can possibly last much longer."

He pressed his lips together, then released them suddenly.

"My friend's still unconscious, I suppose?"

"He was until a few minutes ago," she said, running her hand over the shoulder of her red cape. "However, I must

warn you to prepare yourself for a shock—he's badly paralysed."

"Good God—where?"

"Down the right side."

"Poor Sam!" Gort had been leaning heavily on his walking-stick but tight nerves brought him upright. "When—when did it happen?"

"About half an hour ago—bad luck, isn't it?"

Face set, he walked to one of the four chairs in the sparsely furnished waiting-room and picked up an opened packet of cigarettes.

"Smoke, Sister?"

"Not while on duty."

"Of course." Fumbling badly, he lit a weed and looked across at her. "In your opinion there's absolutely no hope, eh?"

"None whatsoever." She was staring down at the chart. "And perhaps it's just as well—wait till you see him."

"Can I go in now?"

"Soon."

"That might be too late."

"Mr. Murphy isn't related to you, is he?"

"No."

"Then please help us by being patient for a few minutes longer. Nurse Beveridge should be through by six o'clock."

"And what's the time now?"

"Five-fifty."

"Where's Dr. Anderson?"

"In Vila—there was some trouble at the Club—a man was knifed."

"Friendly little party, eh?"

"So it would seem."

He glanced towards the door, then back at her, but it was Sister Almond who spoke:

"Where were you both making for, Mr. Saunders?"

"Here."

"Holiday?"

"No—we aimed on settling for a while."

"Good heavens!" Her brown eyes behind their thick lenses were incredulous. "Not from choice, surely?"

"That's right."

"But why Vila, Mr. Saunders?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"Everything—I loathe the place."

"So shall I if we lose Sam."

She watched him take up a position by the window, her full lips slightly compressed. Sister Almond was a little prejudiced against Americans. During the last war she had married one and in 1947, just a few days before she was due to sail to join her husband in Texas, Major Moller had started divorce proceedings, on what grounds she had never been able to ascertain.

For years she had gone on hating everything and everybody associated with the U.S.A., but since last Tuesday her feelings had settled down to a much more reasonable basis. After Dr. Anderson diagnosed their patient's case as polio, she had noticed Gort shuffling about in the garden, and urged on by a pity she could not dismiss, had invited him into the kitchen for a cup of tea. Since then she had grown to respect this tall, good-looking Southerner.

"I thought," he said presently, while fiddling with the venetian blinds, "that this was going to be one of the best things I'd ever done—one hell of a start, isn't it?"

"What did you have in mind, Mr. Saunders?"

"Nothing definite, but both of us were very keen to get cracking on something."

"If it's work you're after, there's plenty of it here—good jobs, too."

"Do you know of any small plantations for sale, Sister?"

"On the main island?"

"Doesn't matter where."

"So you do intend staying?"

"Hard to say—depends on Sam."

"You're very fond of him, aren't you?"

"He's a great guy."

In deep thought she picked up the chart, then joined him at the window. They stood for some seconds gazing towards the palm-covered hills before which Vila sat unreal and dreamlike in the mist.

Sister Almond spoke:

"Looks beautiful from here, doesn't it?"

He blew a mouthful of smoke towards that brilliant mass of colour on the eastern horizon:

"Sure does—reminds me in a way of Korea."

"Korea—when were you there?"

"Only left it five months ago."

"Oh!—hence that walking-stick?"

"Hm, hm."

"Air Force?"

"No, army."

"Wounded badly?"

"Bad enough."

"How many operations?"

"I lost count after five." He smiled down at her. "How about it now, Sister?"

"What?"

"Your promise of letting me go in to Sam."

She was about to refuse when the door opened and Nurse Beveridge beckoned to her. Gort had lit another cigarette before the sister reappeared.

"I'll give you ten minutes," she said in a sharp professional tone, "not a second more. Come on."

He heard the door click softly behind him and detected a not unfamiliar odour, yet his senses were too confused to associate that horrible stench with the body-littered beaches of Iwo Jima. He moved forward slowly, as if each step called for a great effort, but when a few moments later a partly paralysed face was turned his way, he could not suppress a sharp cry of distress.

"Lo, Gort," Sam greeted in a dead flat voice. "Nice one, ain't I?"

"You'll be O.K.," the younger man muttered, sinking into a chair. "We'll have you out of here in no time."

"Doubt it, son, but I'm not complainin'. When the good Lord gives the sign, it's all right by me."

Gort's hand, which had been groping under the bedclothes, made contact with cold lifeless fingers. He squeezed them tightly.

"Anything you want, old-timer?"

"Not a thing."

"You're feeling pretty low, I guess."

"Kinda dizzy in me 'ead—what day is it?"

"Friday."

"And when did we arrive 'ere?"

"Tuesday."

"I've been unconscious, eh?"

"On and off."

"How do you like this place?"

"The hospital?"

"No—Vila?"

"Swell." Gort put all he had into the lie. "Wait till you see it, Sam, I——"

"I've an idea I'll not 'ave the chance," the patient whispered feebly, "so 'ow about you goin' over to that window and describin' everythin' to me."

"Later, huh?"

"Better do it right away, son—I'm mighty interested, you know."

"O.K." It took Gort a good minute to reach the open window, another before his slowly warming imagination began to expand. He spoke like a man deeply impressed.

"We're on the island of Iririki. Vila's just a short distance away, about a quarter of a mile, I'd say." The speaker paused, glanced towards Sam, who, with eyes closed, seemed to be listening intently. Gort drew a quick breath before continuing. "There's a harbour of clear water, dotted with small craft—mostly canoes. I see a long white beach; at the moment a number of native children are swimming. Behind this beach is the main street. It's quite wide and partly shaded by long avenues of palms. Homes, green, blue, pink and white, cling to heavily timbered hills through which about half a dozen roads curl. The place is full of colour, Sam, gardens are everywhere, and right at the top of a hill is a little church; its steeple glistens in the sunlight like glass.

Gort's voice kept going away from Sam. He heard only a few words of his friend's greatly exaggerated description, yet vague as was the picture of Vila his drugged senses absorbed, he appeared more than satisfied.

"Just what the doctor ordered, eh, son?" he muttered. "Sounds even better than Papeete."

Gort was still staring towards those acres of mud flats he'd called a long white beach.

"It is—far prettier."

"And yet I thought Tahiti was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen."

"Same here. Until we landed in Vila."

"Any surr?"

"No—this is a harbour."

"And you're quite happy about it?"

"I'll say I am."

"Fine." The patient's heavy lids flickered, then opened slowly. "What say you drag me bed over to that window so I can 'ave a look at them 'ills, son."

"Can't be done, old-timer. I've strict instructions——" He halted and glanced towards Dr. Anderson who, unnoticed by both men, had entered the room.

"No need to do that, Saunders," he said, when Gort made as though to leave. "You're quite welcome to stay."

"Thanks, Doctor." Eyes full of anxiety, he followed the physician's every move, watched him bend down and place a stethoscope over his patient's heart, noticed him frown and, after checking Sam's pulse, ask:

"Find breathing a bit difficult?"

"Sure is, Doc."

"How about your chest?"

"Feels tight—just like there was a 'eavy weight on it."

"Been coughing at all?"

"Only a few times."

"Hurts a bit, eh?"

"Not much."

"How's your vision?"

"Had a black-out just before you came in."

"Hm," Dr. Anderson murmured, replacing the bedclothes.

"That'll be all for now."

On joining Gort, however, his face lost its casual expression. Tiny muscles formed into a series of shapeless knots along the doctor's lean jawbone when he whispered:

"America's a great country, Saunders, but there are occasions when I feel like going over there with a Bren gun and knocking off a few of your politicians. Attlee's crowd, too—the whole bloody lot of them."

"Why, Doctor?"

"For allowing this kind of thing to happen."

"Afraid I don't get you."

The surgeon gestured towards Sam.

"With an iron lung. I might have saved your friend's life—do you know why we haven't one?"

"No idea."

"Because it costs dollars."

Gort shrugged in angry fashion. He didn't feel in the mood to enter into a discussion on the world's monetary complexities. His voice had a hard ring when he spoke: "I don't profess to know much about what the dollar means outside the U.S.A., Doc, but if all you say is correct, why doesn't your Government make sufficient money available to buy them—Australia still imports American cars, doesn't she?"

"This hospital is England's responsibility, Saunders."

"Yet it is staffed by Australian personnel?"

"Correct."

"Then what's wrong with England allocating one of its factories to the manufacture of iron lungs?"

"I believe that's being done right now," Dr. Anderson rejoined calmly. "But while we're waiting, people die—your friend, for instance."

Gort's heavy eyebrows became almost a straight line.

"He hasn't a chance then?"

"Not one in a million."

"Hell!"

"I'd advise you to stay close by," the other said on his way to the door. "It's quite possible Murphy will remain conscious right to the end—see you later, old chap."

Gort had no idea how long he stood at the window. There was so much in his mind that time did not matter. As yet, however, he had managed to force real issues aside—Sam's death and what it would mean to him were matters he preferred not to ponder on. Tomorrow, perhaps even today, they would rise to meet him. Meanwhile, all he wanted to do was remain there thinking about a lot of things that had nothing to do with the present or future—Korea, friends he had known, schooldays, his mother, Colonel Bassington, mental flashbacks which embraced a hundred different scenes, people and places crept in and out of the man's thoughts, until at last, growing alarmed by rapid breathing, he swung about.

"Are you awake, old-timer?"

"Yes, son."

"How do you feel?"

"Awful."

Moving quickly to the bedside, Gort sat down. He was running fingers along Sam's deeply furrowed brow when the patient asked:

"Dying, ain't I?"

"Who said so?"

"Doc Anderson—I heard him talkin' to you."

"You must have mighty good ears, Sam."

"Always did." A smile settled for a moment on the speaker's distorted mouth. "Glad you're 'ere, though—there's a few important questions I've got to settle."

"Better reserve your strength—talking won't help any."

"'Aven't got much left, nohow."

"Then relax—take it easy."

"Can't till I've had a few words with you. Listen to me, will yer?"

"O.K. I'm listening."

"My will—you'll find it in that big leather bag—everything's yours, Gort."

"Don't be crazy. I——"

"And in my wallet there's five thousand dollars—should help you along for a while, eh?"

"Both of us, Sam."

"No—from now on you're in this alone, son—plan on staying 'ere, don't you?"

"Can't say yet."

"Stick it out, lad—no sense throwin' in the towel because of me. I'm stayin' in Vila, any'ow."

"How staying?"

"My body—bury it 'ere."

"But——"

"My wish, ain't it?"

Outwardly Gort looked quite calm, yet inside him everything was swelling and contracting. A sharp hissing sound passed his lips when Sam asked:

"Got that straight, son?"

"Sure."

The old man's white head sank a little deeper into the pillow, then was rolled from side to side in a movement Gort interpreted as due to pain. He sat well forward.

"What's wrong, Sam?"

"Dyin', I guess."

"Shall I get Dr. Anderson?"

"No, just sit there."

"Whatever you say."

"Storm blowin' up, ain't there?"

"I—I don't think so."

"Sun still shinin'?"

"Yes."

"Queer yer know, I——"

Gort saw a shadow pass over Sam's face, noticed how the white head had ceased its movement, yet even so it took him some time to realize that he sat gripping the hand of a dead man.

Five minutes later he walked out of the room. Sister Almond spoke to him, but he didn't answer. On the veranda he passed close by where Dr. Anderson and Nurse Beveridge were talking, yet he never even as much as glanced their way. On nearing the water's edge, however, a small figure rose from a rock directly in his path. He started and swung off to the left, but little Butch moved faster.

"Good morning, M'sieur," he greeted, barring the distressed man's way of escape. "In my canoe I've got a bunch of flowers for your sick father. Shall I fetch them?"

Gort thrust the child roughly aside, saying:

"Go away, will you, go away!"

But little Butch was not to be denied. Long ago his frail under-nourished body had grown accustomed to the brutal treatment of Jake Larkins, and that poor crippled man hurrying towards the jetty hadn't meant to push him over. He was in the act of rising when Gort happened to glance back. Seeing the child scrambling to his feet, he murmured a shocked "What made you do it?" and turned about.

The child's lovely smile was waiting for him.

"I slipped, M'sieur," he said, brushing the dust from his faded navy-blue swimming trunks. "A stone—it moved under my foot."

"I'm very sorry for pushing you like that," Gort returned, placing a hand on the youngster's blond sun-bleached curly hair. "What's your name?"

"Little Butch."

"And you live here?"

"No, M'sieur—over there."

Blue and grey eyes met for a moment. The boy's were still smiling, the man's heavy, sombre as a winter cloud-packed sky. Then suddenly with a laugh little Butch was running down the narrow stone-littered track.

Gort had not taken more than a dozen steps when he noticed the youngster returning. He carried a delightful bunch of flowers in one hand, a small basket of mangoes in the other. Pitifully thin arms held these forward.

"For M'sieur's father. The flowers I gathered in the Valley of Sounds, the fruit is from M'amselle Ealant—she wishes your sick father a speedy recovery."

Gort just stood gazing down into the boy's saint-like face, now at the flowers, now at the artistically arranged fruit. Presently he shook his head.

"M'sieur was not my father. We were old friends—he died only a short while ago."

He watched tears gather in the boy's eyes, watched flowers and mangoes slipping from brown, delicate fingers, to go rolling down the bank's steep side. Unconsciously both man and child followed the cast-away offering's undignified descent. The fruit struck the water first, dropped into the rising tide with a slight popping sound; the hand-worked

basket followed, had started to drift away before being joined by that pathetic bunch of flowers.

"It was very nice of you anyway," Gort said, breaking the silence. "Right through his life Sam loved flowers—he was that type of man."

Little Butch turned his face away. He didn't know why he was so upset over the death of someone he'd never met, but poor M'sieur looked terribly unhappy standing there leaning heavily on his walking-stick, and he had such a nice face. If only Angélique were here; she would have known what to—

Gort spoke again.

"I'm looking for somewhere to stay until I can catch another boat—perhaps you can help me."

"There's not much to choose from, M'sieur—there are only two hotels in Vila. Madame Journez's is easily the best."

"And how do I arrange to get my luggage brought over?"

"Have you much, M'sieur?"

"Between us, six cases and a cabin trunk."

"They are at the hospital?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll borrow Harry Newton's launch," the youngster said, drying his eyes. "With two boys we can manage easily."

"Swell!—here's ten dollars. If it costs any more you can let me know."

Ten dollars was a lot of money to little Butch; with half that amount he could have purchased a bottle of gin to appease his mother's unquenchable thirst, cigarettes for Larkins whom he hated yet feared enough to keep supplied with smokes and food, biscuits, candy, perhaps even a few bars of chocolate. All these for the taking of that bill, but he thrust Gort's hand aside, saying:

"One dollar is more than sufficient, M'sieur. Harry is my friend and would not let me pay for his boat. As for the boys, a hundred francs would more than satisfy them."

"But what about yourself?"

"To you my service is free, M'sieur."

"Not this time," the man said, forcing the bill into little Butch's hand. "And now your canoe, can I hire it for an hour?"

"It is not mine, but Angélique she would be very happy for you to have it. However, it will be necessary for you to drop me at the wharf first, M'sieur."

"You have me wrong," Gort explained. "I only want to get away from this place and look for a room. What's that hotel you mentioned again?"

"Madame Journez's—I'll introduce you to her."

"I'd much rather have you see about my luggage, if it's all the same to you, little guy."

"M'sieur?"

"Hm, hm."

"Why do you call me 'little guy'?"

"Any objections?"

"Oh, no, I rather like it. You are American—yes?"

"That's right. Some of our fellows were here during the last war."

"So Angélique told me."

"She's your sister?"

"Oh, no, M'sieur—my very great friend."

"I see." Gort's gaze swept from the hospital's red roof to a basket bobbing up and down in the bay. He sighed before continuing: "I'm ready when you are."

"We go right away." The boy smiled sadly. "The track from here is rather steep, M'sieur, but you can lean on my shoulder—I'm very strong."

"Thanks, I will."

After several near falls they eventually gained the canoe, a long narrow craft, complete with outrigger and two paddles.

"This might take some doing," Gort, in pain after the steep descent, muttered, rubbing his stomach. "I'm badly shot up and will find it difficult getting into that thing."

"I'll hold it steady though, M'sieur—like this, see?"

It took the ex-soldier a good three minutes to accomplish what a year ago he would have done in a few seconds; but, once seated, he turned grateful eyes on the youngster and said:

"O.K. You can shove her off."

As their canoe glided swiftly towards Vila the man was silent. Meeting little Butch had helped him to weather the first impact of Sam's death, for a while anyway. But from the moment of leaving the island emotion had forced its way to his throat. Alone he might have cried, yet now he just sat there listening to the soft ripple of water curling from the craft's wooden sides.

"Poor old Sam," it seemed to say. "Poor old Sam!"

CHAPTER XIII

THEY walked slowly along the narrow Rue Higginson. Little Butch, looking frailer and more insignificant than ever, strolled beside his tall companion, pointing out places of interest. Up there on the hill five Tonkinese had been guillotined for the murder of a Frenchman years before. It was said he was having an affair with one of their wives; but little Butch declared he didn't believe a word of it. And over there was the joint Court where all cases were tried. That big house on the right, M'sieur Goobay lived there. He was a wealthy planter, and if M'sieur cared to stop here he could see the roof of Angélique's white bungalow. What did her father do? Well, he was a very brilliant doctor, yet of late he'd been spending far too much time at the club, but she would soon put a stop to that. Angélique had such a strong influence over everyone, a good influence, if M'sieur knew what he meant. How long had he been coughing like that? Months now, yet there was nothing to worry about. Where could an undertaker be found? Well, they didn't have a real one in Vila, but there was M'sieur Daveyron who lived in the Rue d'Alsace Lorraine and, after collecting the luggage this afternoon, he'd take him along to meet the gentleman.

So they had talked while walking side by side along the Rue Higginson. There was nothing forced about their conversation, for already both were friends, drawn together by an irresistible bond, against which mistrust, malice or injustice would never pound its ugly fist.

Little Butch's quaint accent, manner and large blue eyes fascinated Gort. Several times over the past quarter of an hour his youthful companion's odd way of expressing himself had made him smile, and if ever he felt less like being amused it was now.

They were passing a shop on the step of which three Chinese children were playing when a young voice broke into the man's thoughts:

"That's Madame Journez's hotel, M'sieur. It is small, but clean, and the table is quite good—do you like cooked snails?"

"No, sir—do you?"

"Not very much."

"So you've tried them?"

"Only once."

"Didn't hold out your plate for a second helping, eh?"

The boy laughed, and in an impulsive gesture of affection gripped Gort's hand, saying:

"Be careful of that gutter, M'sieur."

A minute later they entered the bar of Madame Journez's hotel. It was a large room, measuring some thirty by twenty feet. Near the doors stood half a dozen tables, their tops covered by none too clean red-and-white check cloths. Beyond these a few beer-stained lounge fixtures graced the wall on which amateur artists had tried their skill at sketching nude females. All were crudely executed and in most suggestive postures.

The left-hand corner was allotted to the bar, and near it squatted a home-sized billiard table, balanced on three legs and an upturned fruit-case.

Gort spoke first:

"So this is the best Vila has to offer, huh?"

Little Butch, whose sense of standards had been much vitiated by his sordid background, was gazing admiringly about the room.

"What do you think of it, M'sieur?"

"I'll get by, I guess."

"But the drawings, are they not good?"

"I've seen better." Gort felt the youngster's eyes upon him and, quick to sense his childish disappointment, added: "A few are quite good—that one over the door, who did it?"

"A planter from Tanna," the child explained proudly. "They say he's very clever."

"Is that so?"

"Oh, yes."

The new-comer's critical gaze was still fixed on the grotesque figure when a woman entered the room. At first glance she reminded Gort of a huge toad standing on its hind legs, but when Madame Journez saw little Butch she gave a smile which improved her appearance.

"Ah, I've been upset," she said, waddling towards them. "Two of my boys, they go walkabout last night and the place it is so untidy. Does M'sieur require a drink?"

Little Butch spoke a few sentences in French. The woman kept shaking her ugly head, but suddenly she nodded and looked at Gort.

"I am so sorry, M'sieur. We 'eard your friend was very sick, but—— Oh, it is terreeble—terreeble."

"I called about a room," he said, without acknowledging her sympathy. "Hope you can put me up for a few days."

"Of course, M'sieur." Madame Journez was smiling again. "During the last war we 'ave a lot of your countrymen here—they were such nice boys."

"Swell!" Gort, who already disliked the woman, breathed a sigh of relief when his youthful companion took over:

"We want the best you have," he said firmly. "That one out in the grounds will do."

Her round face became a trifle sharper with cunning:

"For M'sieur I'll do it," she rejoined with a quick lift of fat shoulders, "but perhaps he's not prepared to pay so much."

"How much?" The question came from little Butch.

She placed a hand against her sweating brow and appeared as though she were trying to work out the lowest tariff possible, but the child had her measure.

"The room has been empty for months, Madame," he reminded quietly, "and when Jim Buckley lived there you only charged him three Australian pounds a week."

Her small pig-like eyes became angry:

"He's one big liar. My price is seven, not including cleaning—is that not so?"

"It is you who tells untruths, Madame," little Butch returned calmly. "I knew Jim Buckley well, and once he told me you were thinking of reducing his board by ten shillings."

"Impossible!" Madame Journez's sagging cheeks puffed up like a fully extended football bladder and were much the same colour, so red, in fact, that Gort, fearing for her blood-pressure, spoke:

"I think you'd better go along and get my bags, feller. I'll not be here long enough to worry about a few pounds. Another thing, I'm badly in need of a shower."

But the boy stood his ground:

"How much are you going to charge, Madame?"

"Seven pounds."

"No, three."

"Seven it is."

"Then he'll not be staying."

She was running a duster over one of the tables, yet spared a second to throw an appealing look towards Gort, who, in justice to his self-appointed guide, did not flicker an eyelid.

Headed by little Butch, the pair were making for the door when Madame called:

"Four pounds ten shillin's. It is my last word, M'sieur."

"Three," the boy bargained over his shoulder—"three pounds or nothing. Better hurry, though; I know someone who'll put my friend up for much less."

They were out in the hot sunlight before a very repentant Madame Journez caught up with them. She was perspiring freely and her huge breasts rose like bellows:

"I'm one big fool even to think of it," she scolded, reaching for Gort's arm, "but M'sieur is American and 'as 'ad much trouble. It would break my 'eart to turn him away—you come with me—yes?"

Over the subsequent half-minute little Butch rose sky high in the man's estimation. Most boys of his age would have laughed in triumph, but now his victory won, the youngster's face remained grave as with a casual: "I should be back in about two hours, M'sieur," he turned and moved quickly along Rue Higginson.

M'sieur Balant's thoughts were far away as he sat alone watching the darkness descend over Vila. Several times since walking on to the veranda he had regretted turning down Angélique's request that they go for a stroll. She had looked so beautiful in that white cotton off-the-shoulder frock, had reminded him of Annabella. Her little frown of disappointment when he'd muttered an apologetic: "Good heavens, not in this heat, darling," had almost made the man cry out in pain; but now as the tropic night began to cloak everything in black impenetrable shadows, which in turn were punctured by tiny stabs of light, he sighed with the air of one whose soul is momentarily comforted.

"Ah, that is good," he muttered aloud, "very good. If I had my way I'd shut out the whole vulgar scene for ever. Every day it's the same, harsh sunlight, mud flats and niggers. There is beauty, too, of course, but this I do not see."

He looked up quickly on hearing footsteps followed by the click of a gate.

Angélique was climbing the steps when her father spoke: "Why are you back so soon, my pretty one?"

In the gloom he could just make out her figure as she came forward and pressed a bunch of wild violets to his nose.

"Nice, Poppa?"

"Delightful—where did you go?"

"Only as far as the waterfront," she answered, sitting at his feet. "There I met little Butch—he told me the bad news."

"Bad news?"

"Yes, the sick American, he died this morning."

"Oh!"

"And tomorrow he is to be buried here—little Butch had just left his friend."

M'sieur Balant lit another cheroot from the one in his hand, then leaned well back in the chair. He coughed before speaking:

"Always you have taken on the sorrows of others, Angélique. As a child your heart could be touched by the look in a hungry dog's eye, or a bird with a broken wing. Once you fretted for days because I snuffed out the life of a diseased kitten—it is not good to be so vulnerable to the hard things of life, dear."

She smiled and rested her dark head against his knees:

"How would you have me, Poppa?"

"More guarded, child."

"Against what?"

"Your heart. For instance, a short while ago you left this house very happy, but down the street there is news of a stranger's death and now you are upset."

"Yes, Poppa."

"Yet this American, he is nothing to you."

"There is his friend, though."

"Who?"

"M'sieur Saunders."

"You met him?"

"No, but little Butch told me everything—he's badly crippled."

"So you are sad, eh?"

"For him, yes."

"Because he is crippled, I suppose."

"And all alone in a strange land, Poppa."

He ran tender fingers through her jet black hair:

"Where is M'sieur Saunders staying, dear?"

"At Madame Journez's. When little Butch left he was starting to unpack."

"So he intends remaining here?"

"I do not know."

"He is young, of course?"

"I believe about thirty, Poppa."

"Gets about on crutches, eh?"

"No, on a walking-stick."

"Indeed," Monsieur Balant muttered, his professional instincts aroused. "Has an artificial leg, probably."

"Probably."

The father smoked in silence for a while, during which he watched the moon slide behind a large white cloud, to leave a gold shadow on the sky's deep blue face. Presently he laughed shortly:

"Men—what fools they are sometimes, Angélique!"

Her head came away from his knees:

"Why, Poppa?"

"Well, M'sieur Saunders and his friend, with the world to choose from, came here. Was theirs not a silly choice?"

"Then you, too, are a foolish man, Poppa."

"Admittedly."

"And I am a silly girl."

"That point I challenge, darling."

"But Vila, I like it very much. Here I have you, hundreds of friends, my home, everything—where else could I find so much?"

"Always you have been a child of wind and rain, my pretty one," he said, leaning slightly forward. "Often I look at you and see and hear many things: the soft murmur of palms, waves, their tops touched by moonlight, rolling shoreward, the crackling of open fires." Monsieur Balant sighed. "Hurricanes, I hear them too, tearing with angry fingers at the groaning timbers of my jungle hut. I see trees uprooted and black clouds scurrying in fear from the wrath of God."

A little frown rode between Angélique's eyes as she asked:

"Did Mother enjoy island life, Poppa?"

"Yes—yes, of course."

"Coming straight from Paris, she must have found it very strange for a while, though."

"Naturally."

Angélique was about to ask another question, but her father had risen and was moving towards the steps:

"Poppa?"

He turned:

"Yes?"

"Where are you going?"

"To the club—for a while."

"But what of your dinner?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Then I'll go as far as the Rue de Paris with you," she said, gaining her feet. "I'll get my torch."

They strolled arm in arm down the rough unmade footpath following a wide circle of light. The night, though dark, was unusually pleasant for Vila. A slight breeze came from the harbour, carrying with it a mixture of salty smells, of an ebbing tide and damp, half-exposed rocks. The sky, too, was brilliant, a vast ceiling of blue throbbing with stars which here and there were curtailed by a flimsy veil of pure white cloud. Overhead a crescent moon, as if resentful of the heaven's rivalry, hung pale and remote. Angélique was the first to speak:

"I've heard bad reports about you and that silly club, Poppa."

He grunted and looked at her in a startled way:

"If it's little Butch I'll ring the young devil's neck. It was him, I'll warrant."

"Ah, but you are wrong."

"Then who?"

"I'm not telling." She made a little grimace. "Many people say you've been spending most of your nights there—is that true, Poppa?"

"Not altogether."

"I've also heard you sit alone—refuse to mix with others."

"That, I admit, is perfectly true," he answered sternly. "These past six months I've grown weary of their inane and unintelligent conversation, consequently prefer my own company—anything wrong with that?"

"Do you not still play at the tables, though?"

"For almost a year I haven't."

"Why?"

"Because gambling no longer interests me."

"So you just sit there drinking and thinking?"

"Exactly."

"What about, Poppa?"

"Those wasted years which——" Monsieur Balant halted in the middle of the sentence. "Ah, but I do not want to talk about those things—you must leave me here, dear."

Smiling sadly, she slipped her arm from his:

"Poppa?"

"Well?"

"Since I've been away you've lost something terribly important."

"What, my pretty one?"

"The zest for living. These days you do not laugh any more—why?"

He glanced furtively towards the lighted club windows, then back at her:

"What you say is all too true, Angélique, yet given time I'll snap out of these despondent moods." The speaker gestured hopelessly with his hands. "You, also, have changed. You've grown much more beautiful, more observant too, and while as your father I applaud the former, I do not relish the latter—to be questioned is, as you know, something I've never appreciated. Something in me rebels against it."

The frown between her eyes deepened:

"But I'm only trying to help you, Poppa. It hurts me to see you unhappy."

"Have I ever hinted at being so?"

"Not directly, yet there must be some reason for your shunning old friends—it is not like you to do that."

"I explained why a few minutes ago," he returned somewhat stiffly. "The crowd here bores me, has for years. Emotionally we are miles apart and as a man of some intelligence I've grown tired of discussing the price of copra, plantations, or the growing menace of coconut crabs."

"I understand." Her voice sounded strangely wistful. "In Vila there's so little for a man like you. Perhaps one day we leave, eh?"

"Would to God I had the courage, darling."

"Courage, Poppa? It only means selling our little house and packing. Everything could be arranged within a few weeks."

He stood very straight, appeared to be looking across the harbour. But Monsieur Balant saw nothing except his own dark misery, and tonight, as in the past, it was both frightening and inescapable. Alarmed at last by his silence, Angélique reached out and gripped one of his cold hands:

"There is just one more question I must ask, Poppa—answer it and I'll go."

His gaunt face was turned slowly:

"What, dear?"

"Are you ill? Know of something and are keeping it from me?"

"Organically, I'm perfectly fit," he said, trying to laugh. "Blood-pressure just below normal, heart and lungs sound as a bell, reflexes a trifle sluggish, yet in keeping with my years. Satisfied?"

"Yes, Poppa." She was smiling again. "How long will you be?"

"A few hours."

"I'll give you till ten o'clock."

"Better make it eleven," he advised, moving across the road. "I'm particularly thirsty tonight."

She waited until his tall figure had become part of the darkness, then began retracing her steps. Half-way up the hill, however, she halted, stood for some seconds silently debating a matter which, to judge from her lovely face, was obviously of great moment. Still undecided, she took three steps forward, paused, turned about and, muttering a husky "Ah, why not?" hastened towards the main street.

CHAPTER XIV

IT was nearing seven-thirty when Gort, his unpacking completed, decided on a walk before turning in. After fiddling with the obstinate lock of his door for some minutes and being convinced eventually that it had ceased to be of service, he moved into the darkened room and took Sam's wallet from under a sagging mattress. With this safe in his hip pocket, he drew the door closed and moved cautiously towards the gate.

While passing under a window of the bar, he heard angry voices. The woman's—he recognized as Madame Journez's—was imploring someone not to start any trouble. The sound of a table being overturned followed, then another voice, shouting in agitated English, challenged:

"I'll kill the black swine for that."

Gort smiled grimly, breathed a quiet "Nice place" and, gaining the road, turned left.

The waterfront was full of smells, some pleasant to his nostrils, others sickening, honeysuckle and human filth, frangipanni and that dank offensive odour rising from mud-flats, all vied with each other for supremacy.

The Rue Higginson was practically deserted. Occasionally a native passed, greeted him with a friendly "Good night, master," or "Bon soir," and quickly disappeared into the darkness, but there was life on the harbour. Several small schooners, their portholes caressed with light, winked at him from their moorings, while here and there canoes, though unseen, left glittering wakes of phosphorescence as they slipped through the voiceless night.

Unsure of foot on an unfamiliar road, Gort took ten minutes to cover two hundred yards. Pausing for the first time, he lit a cigarette and was about to continue when he noticed the shadowy outline of a figure leaning over some stonework near the wharf. As Gort drew near the man spoke:

"Still very sticky, isn't it?"

"Sure is."

"Should get a bit cooler soon, though—when that southerly really gets going."

"Hope so."

"A stranger to Vila, aren't you?"

"Arrived here four days ago."

"American, eh?"

"Sure am; and you're an Aussie. I'll bet on it."

The shorter man laughed:

"Correct—the name's Brown, Dave for short."

"And mine's Gort—pleased to meet you."

"Fine," Brown said, again leaning over the wall. "Where were you making for?"

"Nowhere in particular."

"Just felt like a stroll?"

"Hm, hm."

"You'll find yourself often doing that in this dump—nothing else here."

"Obviously you're not too keen on Vila—been here long?"

"Going on six months and fed up to the teeth already."

"Then why stay?"

"Under contract, worst luck—care for a smoke?"

"Got one, thanks."

Brown lit a cigarette, puffed hungrily at the weed, then asked:

"What's the latest news about your mate?"

"He died this morning."

"No!"

"It's true," Gort muttered, jabbing his stick into the hard earth. "I've been going round in circles ever since. You see, only for me he'd have been alive tonight."

"Why?"

"Well, at the last minute he decided to come with me."

"I wouldn't think along those lines, old chap," Brown sympathized. "Doesn't do any good—polio, wasn't it?"

"Yes, polio."

"Rotten luck."

Silence fell between the two men. Gort stood stiffly gazing across the road; Brown, shoulders relaxed, staring down at the glowing end of his cigarette. He spoke first:

"Going to bury the old bloke here?"

"That's how he wanted it."

"Jesus!"

"I've no choice." Gort's voice, sharp and uncompromising, betrayed nerves strained to breaking-point. "There's not a soul in Vila knows anything about embalming, and with no

ship touching this port for three weeks, what else am I to do?"

"Never thought of that," the other said, half turning. "Don't suppose it matters anyway. To a dead man this lousy place is just as good as anywhere."

"Perhaps you're right."

Brown allowed the cigarette to fall from his fingers, then leaned forward so as to watch its life snuffed out by the mud's dark fingers. Satisfied, he laughed:

"I'll wager that when the *Miranda* enters this God-forsaken hole next month you'll be straining at the leash. As for me, I'll hang around and cry on your shoulder."

"Really hate the joint, don't you?"

"That and a bit more."

"Did you feel like this right from the start?"

"On the contrary, I thought it was going to be all right—left the ship quite impressed as a matter of fact."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm the local radio operator."

"So we're not altogether shut off from the world, eh?"

"Hardly—if you wished it I could have a message delivered to your home within a few hours."

"Swell—your quarters, how are they?"

"Comfortable enough."

"And who looks after you?"

"I've an excellent boy."

"All in all you sound pretty well provided for."

"In some things, I am," the Australian admitted grudgingly, "but that's only the beginning."

"What's the next part?"

"Vila—it stinks to high heaven."

"I don't get you."

"You will—want to hear a strange story?"

"True or fictional?"

"True—every word of it. The last chapter was played here right before my eyes."

"Then how about another cigarette before you start?"

"Thanks."

When flicking on his lighter, Gort caught a glimpse of Brown's face; its irregular features were hard set, the eyes cold, like those of a mullet recently dragged from the sea.

"Just by way of background, let me digress for a moment," the other man said, throwing back his head. "I'll try and explain in a few words why I consider Vila only fit for swine."

He paused, and pointed towards the harbour. "In daylight these waters are alive with fish, but God help anyone who eats one without first of all having a native inspect it."

"You don't say?"

"It's right—do you know why?"

"No idea."

"Because six out of every ten are poisoned." The speaker's voice rose triumphant. "Like to hear a few more don'ts, old chap?"

"I'd appreciate being forewarned, if you don't mind."

"Good." Brown laughed again. "Swimming, better count that out, too—unless you happen to be with one of the locals."

"Why?"

"Get scratched by coral and you'll be a cot-case in less time than it takes to change your clothes. You see the coral's poisoned too"

"Hell!"

"And never move out of doors during the day without a topee."

"Sunstroke, eh?"

"Correct."

"Anything else?"

"Well, if during your walk tonight there's an earth tremor, don't get scared. They occur here at least twice a week." The Australian grinned in the darkness. "There's some other points to bear in mind, but those I've mentioned are the most important. Now to my story."

"Yes—yes, of course."

"Ever heard of a native advocate?"

"Can't say I have."

"He's a legal bloke, brought here from a neutral country to look after the niggers." Brown, his ego appeased by the knowledgeable rôle Gort's lack of New Hebridean history accorded him, was getting everything out of the situation. "This, of course, is a condominium, with both Great Britain and France doing the honours—get it?"

"I think so—the native advocate represents both countries, and being neutral is supposed to be quite impartial."

"Exactly. His job is to advise and defend the natives; in short, a father-confessor sort of thing."

"I cotton on now."

The Australian made a wheezing sound as he drew at his cigarette. Withdrawing it, he looked up:

"A Belgian by the name of de Follet was in charge when

I arrived. He'd been here going on for three years, and from what I am told was exceptionally brilliant. After dinner, it being my first night in Vila, a chap I knew took me for a tour of inspection; which eventually led us into that dive along the road. A three-piece band was playing and a crowd of niggers clustered about the entrance, watching what was going on." Brown shrugged. "Through the smoke haze I noticed a white man swinging from beam to beam, uttering blood-curdling cries which kids associate with Tarzan—it was M'sieur de Follet, our native advocate."

"I'll be dog-goned—drunk, huh?"

"Worse—right off his rocker."

"Poor guy—he was recalled, of course?"

"Two months later." Brown bent down and, after running his hand along the still-warm earth, located a pebble. He kept tossing it up and catching it. Gort, following this almost childish procedure, had counted fourteen before his companion went on:

"On the day de Follet left for home, I happened to be on the wharf. I've never seen anything so tragic as him sitting beside a small port looking like a filthy beachcomber. He hadn't shaved for a week, taken a bath either, and his faded blue-serge coat was about three sizes too small—no socks, white unpressed trousers and dirty sandshoes completed M'sieur de Follet's attire."

"Sounds as though he'd really had it."

The Australian threw his pebble a little higher, made a half-hearted attempt to catch it, missed, then laughed:

"Take a vote and I don't think you'd find more than a dozen locals who wouldn't get out if they could. Most of them lack the guts. A few can't, because they're making more money a month here than they'd earn in a year elsewhere. As for the rest, I wouldn't give you thirty bob for the whole crowd."

"I find it hard to believe that," Gort said, watching a cloud sail lazily across the moon. "Naturally because of what's happened I'm a bit prejudiced, yet had things gone according to plan I reckon we could have settled down O.K."

"So you're not passing through?"

"No, sir—old Sam and I travelled a long way to have a crack at Vila."

"Doing what?"

"We thought of buying a small plantation."

"And now?"

"The idea's busted."

"You'll return home?"

"Probably."

"Lucky beggar—married?"

"No—how about you?"

"Got two nippers."

"Nice going."

"Trouble is, I can't bring my family here. What with malaria and no decent schools, looks like I'll just have to take it on the chin."

"Feeling like you do, I'd get them here pronto."

"Not on your life—it would be sheer murder."

"But other children seem to be all right—little Butch, for instance."

Brown looked around quickly:

"Ah, so you've met the kid, eh?"

"Left him only about an hour ago."

"And you think he's all right?"

"Well, isn't he?"

"No, the boy's dying."

"Dying?"

"With T.B.—ever yone here knows that."

Shocked into silence, Gort moved a few paces along the wall. Of all the things Brown had told him, only the news about little Butch struck home. On several occasions during the afternoon he'd remarked about the youngster's cough. Once, after a particularly severe spasm, he had resolved to take his new-found friend to a doctor at the first opportunity, yet not for a moment had Gort been really alarmed. Appalled now, he finished his cigarette and lit another. So the little guy was dying, eh? Well, that just about finished everything. Since their meeting he'd kept saying to himself: "I sure am lucky stumbling across a kid like that. Sam was right. I've got to stay here to see the job through."

Brown's voice just reached him:

"I suggest we go to the club and have a drink—agreed?"

"Some other time," Gort returned, falling into step. "Not far down the road, is it?"

"About a hundred yards."

"Then I'll do the distance with you—that is, if you're not in a hurry."

"I'm not—why the stick?"

"I kinda like it."

"Oh!"

"I say?"

"Yes."

"How long have you known about the little guy?"

"About six weeks—terrible thing, isn't it?"

"Awful—he's the cutest kid I've ever met."

"Very soon you'll meet someone even cuter, old chap. M'amselle Balant—she's absolutely terrific; right out of this world, as the saying goes. Interested?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Woman-proof, eh?"

"That's it."

"Then you're in for a hell of a shock," Brown challenged, giving his companion a playful slap on the back. "I've seen some beautiful women in my time, but no one like her, and I'm not kidding."

Gort increased the tempo of his shuffling feet. Brown's enthusiasm did not appeal and he had only one thought in mind: to get to his room. There was so much to think about, decisions which must—— Ah, thank God, the other guy had stopped.

"Sure you won't change your mind?" he heard Brown ask.

"Certain."

"Hope I haven't bored you."

"Not at all."

"What's your name again?"

"Gort."

"Short for Gordon, I suppose?"

"Hm, hm."

"Then just another word before you go."

"What?"

"I wasn't having you on about Angélique Balant."

"I didn't say you were, did I?"

"No, but I had an idea you might think I was trying to be smart."

"Never entered my mind—I'm just not interested, that's all."

"It was nice meeting you anyway."

"Thanks—good night."

"Good night—Gort."

Brown waited until the cripple's footsteps faded along the Rue Higginson. "Nice bloke," he muttered, swinging about. "Must have been in a motor accident or something."

By the time Gort reached Madame Journez's hotel the cloud which for some minutes had obscured the moon drifted past

like the huge white sails of a phantom ship, moving towards the promised breeze from another world.

Pausing at the gate, he glanced up into that mass of blue, white and gold glory and found himself marvelling at the nearness of the stars. They appeared so close that it seemed only a matter of rising on tip-toe and plucking as many as one chose from that throbbing, awe-inspiring background.

"Won't be long now, Mrs. Murphy," he muttered aloud, lifting his walking-stick and running its tip across the brilliant face of heaven, "Sam's soul is already on the way—reserve a place up there for him, a high place, so he can see everything going on down here."

His heart made a little lighter by this unprompted spiritual thought, he pushed open the gate and made for his room.

A few seconds later the soft snick-snick of snooker balls brought him to another halt, but after one glance at the motley crowd clustered about a billiard table, he continued on his way. When half-way across the yard, however, his uncertain feet came together quickly, remained thus for at least half a minute, then were pushed forward in strides both short and urgent.

Angélique, absorbed in arranging the last of her flowers, did not hear his shuffling approach; she was, in fact, about to add a cluster of pink hibiscus to a jar collected from a heap of junk in the yard when his sharp "You're in the wrong room, lady," forced her around.

For a time neither spoke. Angélique looked strangely child-like as she stood in the pallid glow of a swinging oil lamp regarding Gort through wide, somewhat frightened eyes. He seemed so stern and menacing standing over there at the door, like a man built of layer after layer of disillusionment; so menacing indeed that had the room possessed another exit she would have rushed through it in panic. Stooping a little, the spray of flowers still clutched in her left hand, thin nostrils dilated, face flushed one second, drained of colour the next, she moved slowly backwards, stopped only when an old-fashioned wardrobe made further retreat impossible.

For his part Gort could only stare. A fathomless admiration had replaced the suspicion in his eyes, yet so astonished were the man's senses that his face muscles refused to relax. Twitching horribly, they moved along his lean jaw-bone, caught at his gaping lips until they took on an ugly,

unnatural leer. "My God!" the words kept tumbling in and out of his confused brain. "My God!"

Inarticulate and far less attractive to look at than ever before in his life, he had nevertheless captured something very precious during these dramatic last few minutes: the vision of a young woman whose beauty could only be described as angelic. To him her face was sheer poetry of feature, dignity, innocence and something else. Gort didn't know what it was, yet as second succeeded second the impression that he stood in the presence of a great spiritual force deepened, almost overwhelmed him.

"Forgive me if I frightened you," he whispered, when a moment later she raised a small hand to brush a wisp of hair from her brow. "Got a bit of a shock myself when I noticed a light in my room and the door open. Who are you?"

"The name—if it does not matter, M'sieur," she said in a voice that reminded him of a 'cello's vibrant ring—"I go now—please."

She moved past him, had reached the door before he spoke:

"One question before you leave—may I?"

"I cannot stop you asking it, M'sieur."

"Then why did you come here?"

She was standing on the step with her back to him:

"The sad news about your friend—I heard of it and am so sorry."

"Who told you?"

"Little Butch."

"Ah!" He drew long on the word. "So you're—you're M'amselle Balant."

"That is so."

"It was very kind of you to call."

"I enjoy doing such things, M'sieur."

"Even for strangers?"

"For anyone."

He took a step forward, but so did Angélique, moved sideways beyond that arc of pale light coming from the open door.

"You would have liked old Sam," he said simply, "liked him very much."

"His death is a bad beginning for you, M'sieur."

"Both beginning and end probably."

"Then you will return home?"

"I'll decide that one way or the other within the next week."

Her eyes swept his face:

"It is not good to run away from a dream or make quick decisions, M'sieur."

"Meaning I should hang on?"

"If Vila suits you—yes."

"The reports I've heard have been far from encouraging," he returned, leaning back against the door's framework. "What do you think of it, M'amselle?"

"I should be most unhappy to leave here," she answered quietly. "I came as a little girl, and long ago my heart was captured by its valleys, blue lagoons and singing waterfalls." The speaker paused to indicate a shadowy hill. "Vila has much to offer, M'sieur, but it's not to be found among shops, narrow streets and man-made roads. Most people I know have never ventured more than a few miles from here—these I am sorry for."

His eyes were trying to penetrate the darkness, trying desperately to reach her face, yet nothing showed in the gloom.

"Are you there, M'amselle?"

"Yes, M'sieur."

"Then please move into the light so I can see you."

"No—I go now—the flowers, I hope you like them."

"What flowers?"

"The ones I arranged—they are from M'sieur Nebrac's garden."

His surprised glance toured the room, moved slowly from one glass jar to another, came to rest finally on a few dozen pink petals which speckled the floor. Her voice made him start:

"Nice, M'sieur?"

"Lovely—your gesture, too."

"Tomorrow I send a lot more—for your friend—little Butch—he will take them to the cemetery."

"You are very kind."

"Oh, it is nothing." She was walking away, taking with her all the perfume and youth of the night. "If it were not for these small things, life would lose most of its joy, M'sieur. You sleep now—yes?"

He followed her running footsteps along the road, followed them with head inclined so as not to miss their fading echo. Even it sounded friendly and warm to him.

CHAPTER XV

THE faces of man and child were deeply drawn as they stood in the hot afternoon sunlight, gazing down at a mound of recently disturbed earth. It had been a simple ceremony, witnessed by only a small group of people, the majority of which consisted of curious natives. Gort, little Butch, Dr. Anderson and Sister Almond had stood around the youthful-looking Father Gallagher while he read the service, had listened attentively as "The joy of going Home, of being taken away from this unhappy world to find everlasting love," was stressed with great sincerity.

After the service the small group of whites had talked for a while, but on Gort declining Dr. Anderson's offer of a lift back to town and Sister Almond's pressing invitation to join the hospital staff at dinner, three of the party had gone their respective ways.

Now Gort and little Butch, topees in hand, stood silently before taking their leave of Sam's last resting-place. As cemeteries go, it was a lovely spot; graves, some covered with flowers, others bare pathetic strips of earth hardened by sun, wind and rain, lay side by side. Palms, their fronds heavily burdened with green coconuts, threw long patches of shade across this tiny strip of holy ground in which the dust of men, women and children had merged in voiceless supplication to God.

Beyond a low stone fence, the hill fell away sharply, dropped into gardens, sparse tangles of jungle and boulder-strewn slopes. From there its continuity was broken by the Rue Higginson behind which Vila's harbour stretched, a vast expanse of shimmering water.

Little Butch, completely dressed for the first time in months, looked rather ridiculous in a badly pressed and ill-fitting linen suit. A present from Angélique, it had been purchased in Paris for her young friend in the anticipation of his having added at least half a stone to his frame during her long absence. Hence both safari-coat and short trousers made their owner appear even thinner and shorter than he really was. A shirt at least an inch too big in the collar,

a somewhat faded blue tie and a pair of well-worn sandals encasing sockless feet, completed the child's attire.

Presently he gave a long sigh, at which Gort asked:

"Reckon we'd better be making back, don't you?"

The child's pale face was lifted:

"There's something I'd like to know, M'sieur. Would you mind telling me?"

"If I can."

"Why do they always bury dead people in the ground?"

"In lots of places they're cremated," Gort said, placing an arm on the boy's shoulder. "It's much quicker."

"What's cremated?"

"The bodies are burnt—only takes a few minutes according to an article I once read."

"Burnt!" The child's eyes were pools of horror. "Oh, M'sieur, surely that isn't true—it's an awful thing to do."

"I don't see anything terrible about cremation, little guy."

"You don't?"

"Not really. It makes life a lot easier on the people left behind, doesn't drag at their hearts so much." Gort tore his gaze away from the boy's astonished face, then finished quickly: "Take some of these graves, for instance, the ones covered with flowers, I mean. Do you think it's easy for the loved ones of people buried here to be tortured by memories every time they visit this place? Old Sam was one. For years he spent nearly every Sunday afternoon at our cemetery back home and for most of that time there was nothing there really to grieve about. Just dust and a large part of a fine man's heart."

"I don't understand, M'sieur—whose heart are you talking about?"

"Sam's—when his wife died, he kinda died, too."

"Oh!" Little Butch lifted his hand quickly. "But it doesn't matter what anyone says, it's very wrong to burn people—only in hell do they do such things."

Gort's hand closed tightly over the youngster's shoulder; under his fingers the protruding bones felt so thin and frail:

"So you believe there's a hell, eh?"

"I know there is, M'sieur."

"How are you so certain?"

"The man who stays at our place is always telling me about it—he's such a horrid fellow, M'sieur."

"In what way?"

"He's drunk all the time and is always knocking poor Mummie about."

"Good God!"

"One day I'm going to kill him, M'sieur."

"How long has he been living with you, little guy?"

"For years now." Those lovely innocent eyes were ablaze with indignation and hurt. "A lot of people say he's having an affair with my Mummie, but it's not true, M'sieur, not true."

During his years of soldiering Gort Saunders had witnessed a lot of terrible things—youth blown to pieces, beaches littered with wounded men, ships slipping under water, dyed red with the blood of his own countrymen. All these he had lived through and been unable to shed a tear, yet standing there now with the child's words ringing in his ears, he was unable to breathe a word of comfort. In fact, had he been alone he would have walked over to that headstone less than ten paces away and cried, cried because what had just happened was to him the most pathetic utterance he'd ever heard from human lips. In his distress the man's voice sounded curt:

"Better get going—no sense in hanging around here any longer. Come on."

As they neared the road he felt soft fingers close about one of his thumbs, heard a voice say:

"Can we wait a minute, please, M'sieur. That silly cough's coming on again."

"Sure—go right ahead."

Sweat and tears running down his face, Gort watched the child bent almost double, watched little Butch's whole frame racked by convulsions of such violence that it seemed he must collapse from sheer exhaustion. Then, suddenly, it was all over, and the man was down on one knee, dabbing a handkerchief to blood-smeared lips. "I say," he kept muttering, "I say."

The blue eyes under their pain looked embarrassed:

"It's—it's just a cold in the chest, M'sieur—nothing serious."

"You're coming over to the hospital with me tonight, nevertheless. I'll have Dr. Anderson give you a thorough going-over."

"But I don't like taking medicine, it's——"

"Little guy?"

"Yes, M'sieur."

"Does it hurt when you cough?"

"A bit."

"Where?"

"All over my back."

"Thought so." The index finger of Gort's left hand was pressed against a beautifully shaped but tiny nose. "When were you last examined by a doctor, feller?"

"Only a short time ago."

"By whom?"

"M'sieur Balant."

"When?"

"Just before Christmas, I think it was."

"And what did he say?"

"Nothing, M'sieur."

"Nothing at all?"

"No. He kept grunting, though, and looking awfully stern."

"That settles it," the man said, rising to his feet. "I'll meet you at eight o'clock outside the hotel."

They walked at a slow pace down the hill. Little Butch, by now recovered, chattered on in his inimitable style, Gort listening, breathing a "Yes" or "No," occasionally. In this fashion they reached the waterfront. It was busy with small craft being unloaded and the dark sweating bodies of natives jogging up and down.

They were passing the Rue de la Douane before little Butch asked a question which snatched Gort's thoughts from their sombre trend.

"Don't you think it's very evil to burn people's souls, M'sieur?"

"Burn what?"

"People's souls—it must happen, you know."

"Now get that right out of your head; you're quite wrong."

"I can't see how, M'sieur. When we die our souls go to heaven, don't they?"

"Sure."

"But a burnt soul can't, can it?"

Gort drew to a despairing halt and looked down at the child:

"You're all mixed up," he said softly. "My belief is that immediately we cease breathing our souls leave our bodies. Of course, a lot of people don't agree with this theory. It's just a matter of opinion, I guess."

"And what about hell, M'sieur?"

"Same thing again. Some people believe there is such a place, others don't."

Hands linked, they moved on, were nearing the hotel when Gort asked:

"How are you getting on about school?"

"I am doing a correspondence course, M'sieur. At least, I was until last year."

"Go on."

"Well, I had to stop."

"Why?"

"Couldn't afford the lessons any more."

"Oh!" Gort squeezed the soft fingers in his. "That's something else we'll have to look into."

Little Butch was skipping along.

"M'sieur?"

"Hm, hm."

"Why are you so good to me?"

"Guess I can't help it."

"But we've only known each other a few days—such a short while, isn't it?"

"Long enough for me."

"I'm awfully glad I met you, M'sieur."

"Same here."

"We're going to be great friends, aren't we?"

"I'll say we are."

"And one day soon the three of us will spend a day in the valley—won't that be nice?"

"Three of us?"

"Yes. Angélique, you and I."

The man did not answer. Emotion was again pushing into his throat and he felt sick, and tired, and old. Beside him a Christ-child walked, a dying Christ-child. His heart bled for little guy.

When her attention was attracted by the fierce beam of a torch moving slowly across the lawn, Sister Almond, who since dinner had been seated on the front step, cast aside her cigarette and called:

"Who's that?"

Gort's voice, strangely flat tonight, came back to her from under the first column of palms:

"Saunders here, and a friend. Is it O.K.?"

"Of course."

While waiting for the visitors to approach, Sister Almond

frowned. Oh, what rotten luck! He'd decided to come for dinner after all, but why so late? High tea, as they called it at the hospital, had been over some time, and with Motya, their cook, gone, all she could offer her guests was sandwiches and——

"Good evening, Sister," little Butch greeted, switching off the torch. "Still very warm, isn't it?"

"Ah, so it's you," she laughed, going forward to meet them. "My, how dark it is!"

"We've called to see Dr. Anderson," Gort, a few yards to his youthful guide's rear, explained. "Is he about?"

"You've had dinner then, Mr. Saunders?"

"Little guy has. I just sat and watched him eat."

"Don't feel hungry, eh?"

"Not a bit."

Sighing her relief, Sister Almond led them across the veranda and into the small waiting-room. There she stooped to pump vigorously an Aladdin lamp which stood on a table near the window. Rewarded by her effort, she smiled and looked at Gort:

"What's your trouble, Mr. Saunders?"

"It's our friend," he said, pointing towards little Butch, who, already seated, was reaching for a magazine. "I want him thoroughly examined—particularly his chest."

Watching her closely, his concern mounted; that smile on her lips had vanished, and obviously ill at ease she was again bending over the lamp. He counted ten before she glanced up:

"You're worried about his cough, I suppose?"

"Sure am—ever heard it?"

"Often." Her eyes swept towards the child. "Remember me stopping you in town only a few weeks ago, dear?"

Little Butch nodded and rubbed his sandals together:

"Yes, Sister, I do."

"What did I say to you?"

"That I was a very sick boy and should call at the hospital."

"Why didn't you?"

The youngster's eyes, heavy with guilt, sought the comfort of Gort:

"Shall I tell the truth, M'sieur?"

"I'd be very disappointed in you if you didn't, feller."

"Very well." He placed aside the magazine with reluctant fingers, then stared straight at Sister Almond. "I didn't call

here because on the day you spoke to me I'd just heard about Angélique coming home, and she can do much more for me than any doctor. Just wait and see."

"We're still going to have you examined, though," the man said sternly. "It will only take a few minutes, won't it, Sister?"

"Half an hour at the most," she answered, offering little Butch her hand. "Come with me, dear."

Gort listened until their footsteps faded along the hall, then lighting a cigarette, took up a place by the window. Sure, sure, he knew this room, every cheerless inch of it. Seemed a long time since he was here though—months, in fact, yet in hours it was——

He turned when the door opened, greeted Sister Almond with a gruff:

"Left him with the doc, huh?"

She nodded and held forward a tumbler, saying:

"Drink this, it will lift you up a bit."

He stared down at the colourless fluid, then across at her:

"Draught, huh?"

"No—gin." She smiled, but her eyes did not co-operate with her lips: "You look as though you could do with it."

"Bit white around the gills, am I, Sister?"

"Like death walking."

Grinning stiffly, he took the glass and sipped at the fiery spirit:

"Neat, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"If you're trying to give me a head, I've one already."

"In that case I'll get you some aspirin."

"Don't bother. An encouraging report about little guy might help, though."

Her glance avoided his:

"The days of miracles are over, I'm afraid, Mr. Saunders."

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed, just the same."

"The poor child's very ill, you know that, don't you?"

"So a guy told me last night."

"Where did you first meet little Butch?"

"Here on the island just after Sam died."

"Far too pretty for a boy, isn't he?"

"Swell kid—from now on he's my buddy."

"When have you decided to leave Vila, Mr. Saunders?" she asked, taking a place beside him at the window.

"Haven't made up my mind yet—depends on what happens in there."

"You mean Dr. Anderson's report?"

"That's right."

"But assuming the news is bad—very bad?"

"I'll remain."

"May I ask why?"

His eyes, warmer than she'd ever seen them before, were gazing right through her:

"Guess it's because little guy stepped from this island right into my heart."

A simple statement—yet the sincerity behind every word, the honesty of the man who breathed it, made Sister Almond hurry to the door.

"Excuse me," she whispered, "excuse me."

Gort was lighting his fifth cigarette since arriving at the hospital when Dr. Anderson entered the room:

"The little fellow's with Sister Almond," the surgeon explained. "They're looking at some photographs—mine. Are you keen on photography, Saunders?"

"Not very—never got beyond the Box-Brownie stage."

"Most interesting hobby," the other went on. "Here, of course, the sunlight's a bit harsh, yet I've had some excellent results. Must show them to you some time."

"Thanks." Gort slipped a Chesterfield from his shirt pocket. "Smoke, Doctor?"

"Not just now—what do you think of Madame Journez's?"

"Bit primitive—do for a while, though."

"Not quite up to the Waldorf standard, eh?"

"Hardly."

"You'll find conditions pretty rough in Vila, old chap."

"They were much worse in Korea and here I'm not being shot at."

The shorter man laughed: "I've no argument against that one, Saunders. How's your tummy behaving, anyway?"

"At the moment there's a few butterflies crawling around it."

"You're very unlucky really," Dr. Anderson sympathized, while pacing the room with short, quick steps. "First of all your friend dies, then of all people you could have fastened on to here, it had to be little Butch—fascinating youngster, isn't he?"

Gort's eyes were following his companion's white-clad figure:

"What's the verdict, Doc?"

"I didn't even examine him."

"You didn't, but——"

"A sheer waste of time, old chap," the surgeon said, drawing to a halt. "The boy is doomed—galloping consumption, you know."

"Good God!" Tiny points of sweat were forming on the cripple's upper lip. "Nothing can be done for him?"

"Nothing."

"And how long do you give him?"

"Three months at the most."

The sharp click, click of a walking-stick striking against uncovered floor-boards made Sister Almond close the album on her knees. In the same movement she rose and watched Gort coming down the hall. In passing he did not look at her, didn't even spare a glance for little Butch who stood waiting.

"Come on, feller," he muttered, grabbing at the child's moist hand. "Don't want to stay here all bloody night, do you?"

They were only a short distance from the water's edge when he drew to a halt. Taking a long breath he expelled air slowly, then asked:

"Is that wind I hear?"

"Yes, M'sieur—we might have a rough trip back."

"Who cares?—let it blow hard as it darn-well likes."

"Your wound, is it hurting?"

"No, sir. Don't feel a thing."

"Yet you walked so fast." Little Butch's fingers kept opening and closing under Gort's. "I was really scared for you."

"I'm doing fine."

"M'sieur?"

"Yes."

"What did Dr. Anderson say?"

"Reckons you're O.K."

"But why didn't he examine me?"

"Didn't see any reason to, I guess."

"So you're not worried any more?"

"Right—brother, that gale, sure it's blowing now—just listen to it."

"I like the wind, don't you?"

"I do tonight."

"And the harbour, it's so beautiful. See those little white waves, the way they're dancing towards us."

"Better switch off your torch," the man advised. "Can't risk its batteries giving out before we get home."

In silence and complete darkness they stood staring about them. Shadows covered everything, yet the wind as it rushed in violent gusts through madly swaying palms filled the night with angry sound. Presently Gort felt his companion shiver:

"What's wrong, feller?"

"I'm getting cold."

"Then away we go—you first."

"This is the worst part, M'sieur—do be careful."

"I shall."

Their canoe, bobbing and dipping in the choppy water, had covered only about forty yards when they noticed a lamp hugging the steep hillside. A second later Sister Almond's white figure was caught in the beams of their torch.

"Come back," she yelled, "come back. You'll never make the mainland in this storm."

"I can't hear a word," Gort shouted, making a megaphone of his hands. "The wind's too strong."

"Sister's probably frightened," little Butch called to his friend. "Wants us to sleep at the hospital. 'Tis awfully rough, M'sieur."

"I don't give a damn." Anger born of nervous reaction was heavy on the man as, leaning forward, he snatched at the paddle. "Here, give that to me. We'll make it or bust, little guy."

Their frail craft did credit to its maker over the next two hundred yards, for as yet Gort's distress had made him oblivious of the sharp stab of pain which struck like a knife thrust in his stomach every time safety called for a special effort. When, however, their canoe passed beyond the protection afforded by Iririki Island and met the hurricane's ever-increasing fury, he became suddenly conscious of both bodily agony and his inability to cope with the situation.

Huge waves, their tops thrashed to white foam by a howling wind, rose like a menacing dark wall ahead, behind and around them, one second lifting the canoe contemptuously, the next hurling it into a churning, frothy abyss. It was during one of these heart-chilling slides that Gort, in a frantic endeavour to balance their lurching craft, felt the paddle wrenched from his fingers. He shouted something, an oath probably, made a dangerous lunge to starboard, then with legs fully outstretched, back pressed against the canoe's

curved framework, hands gripping each side, waited for that shattering impact which followed every slide downward.

Little Butch, kept busy bailing out, did not hear the man's cry of dismay, nor was he aware of this new predicament until their craft, after riding safely through the sea's last onslaught, began lurching from side to side.

"Keep her nose shoreward, M'sieur," he called. "It's our only chance."

"I can't. The paddle's gone."

"That's bad—I—look out, here's another wave. Hold on tight, M'sieur."

The curling foam-shouldered monster caught them broadside, smashed against the craft with stunning force, spun it around, then upward. The child was flung overboard first, and Gort, in an effort to grasp his companion's arm, followed.

He remembered little of what happened during the next few dreadful minutes beyond rising to the surface and calling repeatedly: "Where are you, where are you?"

A relief he had not experienced before swept through Gort when presently another wave brought them together. As their bodies touched he cried out in sheer, unsuppressible joy:

"All right, feller?"

"Yes, M'sieur." The boy's voice was sharp with fear. "I've got hold of something, a piece of wood, I think."

"Then hold on, little guy."

"M'sieur?"

"What?"

"It's our boat I'm clinging to."

"That's swell—I'll join you."

Pummelled and engulfed alternately by hissing waves, they clung there without speaking. Gort, treading water, protected little Butch as best he could, kept the child's shivering body between his and the bobbing canoe. Another minute passed before either attempted to lift a voice against the howling elements. It was Gort:

"How are you making out, feller?"

"I'm tired, M'sieur, very tired."

"I've got hold of you, though—don't be frightened."

"How—how far are we from the shore?"

"About two hundred yards."

"Then you swim for it, M'sieur."

"Don't be crazy."

"Please do, M'sieur, we're drifting out—out, I tell you."

"But the wind's dropped—listen."

"I can't—too tired."

"Little guy?"

"Yes."

"There are lights on the wharf; someone must have seen us."

"You swim, M'sieur—you swim."

"Not on your life—I—"

The words on Gort's lips were stilled as a vivid flash of lightning leapt across the sky. In it he had a brief glimpse of the child's face. Its colour shocked him.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered again and again, "Jesus Christ."

In the subsequent ten minutes the man's assumed courage was sorely tried. They were drifting out to sea, there could be no doubt about that now; but there was nothing he could do, only hold on and hope for the best. Those lights on the wharf were getting smaller, seemed a good three hundred yards away, and little Butch's body grew heavier every second, pressed against his stiffening muscles, like a bag of steel.

"I'll take him, M'sieur." Angélique's voice snatched Gort's mind from its numb semi-conscious state, revived him as does a damp towel when pressed against a weary boxer's brow. He felt the warmth of her skin make contact with his for an instant, then heard her say:

"This rope, lash yourself with it to the canoe, M'sieur. I'll be back."

"No need for that," he called. "I can make the shore on my own. I'll follow you in."

"Ready, M'sieur?"

"Ready, M'amselle."

CHAPTER XVI

THE hurricane, having blown itself out, was followed by torrential rain, of a density that reduced visibility to inches. In the enveloping void Gort became separated from Angélique, yet every now and then her encouraging "We're almost there" or "If you get tired, float, M'sieur," infused new life into his aching limbs. Then, suddenly, her morale-lifting voice grew fainter, vanished altogether, leaving him alone in the darkness.

On swimming away from the wrecked canoe, he had been very confident of reaching the shore, but with the rain this assurance deserted him, as soon did his strength. He had no idea which direction to follow, couldn't even see a light or a single star, and he was about all in; so near complete collapse that thoughts of drowning had lost their stimulating urge to greater effort.

During the next five minutes Gort lost awareness of time and space. Will-power alone kept his heavy limbs moving. He had ceased to wonder about Angélique and little Butch. To him they no longer played a part in this terrifying valley of darkness. He felt akin to a worn-out machine about to fall apart. "You'll never make it, feller," he'd told himself a dozen times; "haven't a chance in the world."

Meanwhile, Angélique had reached the wharf, and after will-ing hands had relieved her of the unconscious child she called: "M'sieur Saunders, has anyone seen him?"

Dave Brown answered:

"No, but several boats are out. One may have picked him up."

"That's most unlikely," she returned, pushing her body away from the seaweed-covered steps. "We were together till a short while ago—your torch, please."

"Not thinking of trying to find him, are you?" he asked, handing over his flashlight. "You're not in the race."

But she was already swimming away, swimming with an ease that astonished Brown, one arm propelling her naked body, the other holding aloft a torch.

Gort was going down for the second time when she reached

him. Through the sharp crescendo of sounds filling his ears, he heard her pleading:

"Do not fight with me, M'sieur. Both of us will drown if you do. My arm, please release it."

With his last remaining atom of reason, he obeyed the girl, felt himself sinking, saw a circle of light which appeared to revolve at terrific speed around the whole crumbling universe, then as quickly everything took on its former aspect of darkness. Dave Brown dragged Gort from the water, but when Monsieur Nebrac bent down to assist Angélique the girl shook her head.

"Thank you, no," she muttered between laboured breath. "I am without clothes. Will you please get me a rug, M'sieur?"

While waiting, voices reached her. Someone was saying: "Little Butch will be all right, but this bloke's had it, I think." She lifted her head quickly to inquire why, yet try as she might could not utter a single word.

Angélique was only vaguely aware of taking a blanket from M'sieur Nebrac, or the warmth of it around her body as she was helped up those slimy tide-washed steps. She remembered being carried along the wharf, her father muttering something about "Murder, allowing her to go out in such a storm," then she too passed into the comforting darkness of unconsciousness.

The taxi in which a very irate Monsieur Balant and his daughter were passengers had just departed when Dave Brown, using the same resuscitation method as he had frequently seen employed on Sydney beaches, rolled Gort over on to his stomach. With the patient's left leg between his knees, hands placed on his left and right lower ribs, he pressed slowly downward. This movement had been repeated about twenty times when Gort, rolling his head in agony, whispered: "That'll do, mister, that'll do."

"I'm only pumping water out of you, mate," Brown replied in hurt tones. "Better keep on for a while."

"No, mister. Afraid I can't stand it—badly knocked about down there, you know."

"Oh!" The Australian rose, and while drying his wet hands spoke to the crowd. "Spread out a bit, will you—spread out."

As the circle of humans widened, a tall, extremely handsome man in his late fifties came forward. Bending over Gort, he spoke:

"I'm the British Resident Commissioner here, Mr. Saunders—is there anything I can do for you?"

"That's very nice of you, sir," the cripple said, while being assisted to his feet. "M'amselle Balant and little Butch, how are they?"

Brown answered:

"They're all right. The girl's on her way home, and Harry Jordan left here with little Butch half an hour ago."

"You're a lucky man," Sir George rejoined, running fingers through his well-trimmed goatee beard. "Had that hurricane kept blowing, nothing could have saved you—Angélique did a magnificent job."

"She got me just in time," Gort confessed, leaning back against the rail. "Another few seconds and it would have been all over. As you say—a really wonderful job."

Brown cut in again:

"You should have heard her old man, Sir George—did he go crook!"

"Poor fellow was nearly out of his mind," the Commissioner said, a trifle stiffly, "little wonder, too. Few swimmers could have done what his daughter did tonight and survive."

"But to listen to the doctor anyone would think we'd pushed her in." Brown's voice still sounded hurt. "I didn't know a thing about it until Harry told me she'd dived off the wharf."

"I'd overlook Dr. Balant's harsh words, old chap," the other suggested. "He's not himself lately. I'll drive you to your hotel, Mr. Saunders."

"Thanks a lot. 'Fraid I'll have to borrow your walking-stick, though—can't get along without one."

"By all means—here, take it."

As the Commissioner's car drew up before Madame Journez's Gort held out his hand:

"Good-bye sir. It's been very nice meeting you."

"As a matter of fact, I was on my way to call on you when the hurricane started. Only returned from Tanna this afternoon and heard about your friend. I'm dreadfully sorry, old chap."

Their native driver threw open the door, saying:

"I'll help you, Master."

"I'll manage," the cripple replied, climbing out. "Easy does it."

"Keep that stick, Saunders," Sir George called. "I've a dozen at the Residency."

"Wouldn't hear of it—I'll get another first thing to-morrow."

"But I absolutely insist, my dear fellow." The speaker

laughed quietly. "I'll show it on our ledger as a gesture towards furthering Anglo-American relations—fair enough, eh?"

"You have me there," Gort said, running the thickly knotted wood through his half-closed hands. "Don't suppose you could spare the time to join me in a drink."

"Be delighted—after you get out of those wet clothes."

"That's fine."

As they moved across the yard Sir George asked:

"You're not in the main building, apparently?"

"No—that's my room over there—have you a match?"

"I think so—ah, here we are."

"Thanks."

Lighting the lamp, Gort turned it full on, then motioned Sir George towards a chair.

"Hope you like whisky, Sir George."

"Never touch anything else, old chap."

"Swell." He opened a drawer and, after rummaging round among some socks, withdrew a bottle of Scotch. "Water or soda?"

"Water, thanks, but if it's all the same to you I'll wait until you've changed. Risky getting about like that."

Five minutes later Gort, attired in a pair of jeans and a clean white shirt, re-entered the room. Over one shoulder hung a towel and in his left hand he held a small jug of water. On seeing him, the Commissioner smiled:

"Feel much better now, I'll wager."

"Sure do. Help yourself to a whisky, sir."

Over their first drink the two men talked of generalities, the Russian menace, U.N.O., Korea, the steady infiltration of Communist influence throughout Europe and the Far East. In these the older man found his companion to be particularly well-informed; in fact, had already summed Gort up as an excellent type of young American as he began steering their conversation into more personal channels.

"Sister Almond tells me you might be with us for a while, Saunders."

Gort waited while his guest poured out another whisky, then reached for the bottle:

"That's correct—most of the folks around here whom I've spoken to think I'm crazy, but I'm staying nevertheless."

"Good show—hope I can help you."

"Thanks—you know about my visit to the hospital tonight, I suppose?"

"No, old chap. I've been in town since three o'clock."

"Then you wouldn't have heard."

"Heard what?"

"About little Butch. According to Dr. Anderson he has only a few months to live."

"But that's common knowledge, Saunders."

"I had no idea he was dying," the crippled man said, frowning into his glass. "Even now, I can't believe it."

"I feared something would happen to that poor child," Sir George commented angrily. "It's one of the most sordid tragedies I've ever encountered. His mother's a hopeless drunkard, as you've no doubt heard."

"I hadn't."

"A terrible case. As for the fellow she's living with, he's about the lowest thing I've ever set eyes on."

"Then why not throw him off the island, sir?"

"I'm without the power, unfortunately. After all, he is an Englishman, and although I detest the cove I've got nothing on him—nothing anyway that would justify my ridding Vila of his vile presence."

"Little guy's mother, what nationality is she?"

"French, widow of a Major White. They were married in India."

"What happened to the Major, Sir George?"

"He was killed in Burma some time in '43, but his wife didn't arrive here till '48."

"How was she those days?"

"An attractive woman. She opened a shop not far along the road, built up quite a good connection, too. Used to make hats for my wife."

"Then along came bad guy, eh?"

"Yes—slipped into the harbour one morning on a dirty little cutter—probably stole it. So started the tragedy of little Butch, as we call him."

"What happened, Sir George?"

"The same old story, Saunders. A boulder meets a sex-crazed woman and within a few months has her at his mercy—seen the same thing happen yourself."

"I've read of such cases."

The Commissioner sipped thoughtfully at his whisky. He liked Saunders; found him a splendid conversationalist and easy to get on with, obviously came from a good family. English antecedents, no doubt.

"You know," he said, balancing his glass on the chair's

narrow arm-rest, "some strange things happen in Vila, unbelievable things really, yet I've been here nine years and still like the place. I'll be damned sorry to leave, as a matter of fact."

Gort was watching his own fingers turning the tumbler they held first one way, then the other. He did not look up.

"It's O.K. by me, too, yet up till now the criticism I've heard has been pretty vicious—quite a bit of belly-aching goes on here, doesn't it?"

"Admittedly, but where in this world can one go without meeting disgruntled people? I'll wager some of them are to be found even in heaven."

"True enough."

"I've always said," the older man continued with emphasis, "that only fools find Vila difficult to live in. Of course, the climate's tough. Hot as blazes in the summer and rain drips into one's very soul during the wet season. There's hurricanes, too, much more violent and sustained than the one you experienced tonight; but if a man is prepared to put the best foot forward, much can be accomplished. After all, native labour is cheap and copra looks like fetching a high price for years." The Commissioner paused to finish off his drink, then resumed: "Naturally there are pitfalls, lots of them. Shortage of white women for one thing, lack of any real social life another, which, needless to say, is the reason why that club over there has so many members. Therefore, my advice to you, Saunders is drink in moderation, choose your friends wisely and for heaven's sake don't let loneliness push you into the arms of any designing women—particularly married ones."

"Have you any clue as to why I came here?" Gort asked, breaking the brief silence.

Sir George smiled across at his companion:

"News travels quickly in Vila, old chap—something to do with buying a plantation, wasn't it?"

"We had thought of that."

"Then you could not have arrived at a better time."

"Why?"

"Because less than an hour ago I met a fellow called Henshaw, who owns a small place about four miles out. He's returning to England and wants to sell."

"Do you know the property?"

"Very well; been there often enough."

"And the price?"

"In your money about ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand dollars!" Excitement had lifted Gort's voice, and while shuffling across the room he seemed to hear old Sam saying, "Don't be a fool, lad. If this place is a proposition, of course you can buy it. What about that will in me bag? Sure, sure—you can be stubborn, let pride make mugs of us both, but we were in this adventure together, partners understand, and I want you to go through with it, son, just like I was standing there right beside you. I——"

The Commissioner spoke:

"If you're interested, I'll arrange an inspection any time it's convenient. Henshaw has a jeep and will drive you to Makeeta."

Gort halted at the door:

"I am interested, sir. Trouble is, I haven't got that much money—there's Sam's will, of course, but——"

"May I ask who Sam is, Saunders?"

"My friend—the one I buried this afternoon."

"He left a will, you say?"

"Yes. Also brought with him about five thousand dollars."

"In whose favour is this will?"

"Mine. I'd hesitate to claim it, though."

"He has relatives living, I gather?"

"No one, as far as I know."

"Then what's bothering you?"

"Pride, I guess."

"Have you the will handy?"

"It's over in that bag—I'll get it."

The Commissioner read only a few paragraphs of the late Samuel Murphy's shocking handwriting, and after ascertaining its witnesses, Captain Bouchier and First-Officer La Chande of the *Comte du Pont*, both of whom were known to him, he handed the document back.

"That seems definite enough, old chap. Say the word and I'll have my secretary take you to our legal adviser tomorrow—Bailey will fix everything up for you."

"I'll inspect the place first," Gort replied in an embarrassed way. "I'm a pretty independent sort of——"

"But there's no doubting that will, my dear fellow," Sir George interrupted, taking his topee from the bed. "It's as clear as daylight. I'll get a message through to Henshaw first thing in the morning and arrange an inspection. He should be here any time after ten o'clock. Good night, old chap."

His visitor had been gone some time when Gort threw away

a half-smoked cigarette and rose from the front step. He had almost reached the Rue Carnot when a passing native greeted him:

"Bon soir, M'sieur."

Gort stopped.

"Just a moment, feller."

The native switched off his small flashlight.

"What, master?"

"Do you know where little Butch lives?"

"Yes, master." A hand, invisible in the darkness, was lifted. "You go along, follow big feller road, turn up hill not far."

The white man smiled despite himself and tried another approach:

"What's your name?"

"Willie."

"Fine—doing anything for the next ten minutes?"

"I call on sick father, master."

"Then I'll tell you what I'll do. Take me to little Butch's house and I'll give you a dollar—know what a dollar is?"

The native coughed in his eagerness:

"Oh, yes, yes, master. Big feller silver. Buy much. For it I show you. This way, master, this way."

About two hundred yards further on they turned into the Rue de la Douane, had almost reached the hilltop when Willie halted and pushed open a gate, which hung desperately on its single rusty hinge.

"Bad place, master," he said in tones of awe. "I no go past here."

Gort blew out his breath:

"Thanks, Willie—and now your torch, can I buy it?"

"Torch, master?"

"Yes—that flashlight you're holding—how much?"

"It cost two shillings and sixpence, Australian money, master."

"O.K.—here's another dollar. Will that do?"

By the flickering illumination of worn batteries the native's astonished eyes gazed at the two bills resting in his sweating palm. He seemed unable to comprehend that this modest fortune belonged to him. Suddenly, however, his dark face broke into a big grin:

"You good man, master," he said. "I buy big one light tomorrow. Come along, go far and see plenty. Little light, he'yours all time. Bòn soir."

"Good night, Willie."

Guided by the torch, Gort pushed his way through hibiscus trees whose branches, through years of neglect, were in places locked together. No paths showed in this wilderness. To reach Madame White's dilapidated little house standing box-like on high wooden stilts, one had to move cautiously through an ever-encroaching jungle of creeper, shrub and vine. Yet the place was not without beauty; pink, white and red blossom brushed against the white man's face as he moved forward and a mixture of sweet exotic perfumes filled his nostrils.

On climbing seven protesting steps, Gort hesitated. He didn't know how things would go from here. If what he had heard was true, Madame White might prove a difficult person to handle. There was also her lover to contend with. What if both were drunk and became hostile? He'd be in a bad spot all right. Didn't take much to put him on his back these days. Different story a year ago, huh? But why think of that? There was the question of little guy to settle.

He lipped an involuntary "Ah!" as the door flew open. In the haze of cigarette smoke and foul air he saw a woman, her frock ripped down the front, regarding him through startled and inflamed eyes. Caught unawares, he was speechless for a moment; meanwhile the woman had stepped back a few paces, there to lower the blood-smeared bottle she held. Madame White kept muttering something, but so rapid and thick was her French that Gort could not understand a word.

"I called in to inquire about little Butch," he explained, thrusting the flashlight into his trouser pocket. "We were together when the hurricane started."

She brushed back a handful of grey, matted hair, but made no attempt to cover her exposed right breast, which drooped dejectedly through the dirty cotton frock that served as her outer covering.

"You'd better go away, M'sieur," she warned. "We 'ave big fight. I hit 'im with this—very 'ard."

"You hit little Butch with that!" Gort whispered, indicating the bottle. "I——".

"No, ze man," she interrupted, steadying her swaying figure by gripping the door. "Tonight when they bring my boy 'ome, Jake—he make a scene. I get angry—tell 'im to go. 'E start beating me—so I smash 'im over ze 'ead."

Gort's shoulders dropped in relief, but his eyes retained

their shocked expression. He had never seen a woman so completely repulsive as Madame White: dirty, hair dishevelled, breath reeking with methylated spirits, her bloated face had a coarseness which had to be seen to be believed; a broken nose, eyes rimmed by swollen, inflamed lids, skin pock-marked and raddled with rouge, head sitting on a shapeless body, the Frenchwoman looked what she was—a creature who had slipped into the vilest depth of human degradation.

Appalled and on the verge of vomiting, he moved down a step before asking:

"The boy—how is he?"

She ran a trembling hand across her lips:

"Very tired, M'sieur. We let him sleep—yes?"

"And the guy you hit, where is he?"

"In there."

"Perhaps I'd better have a look at him—might be hurt badly."

"Better 'e die," she said with drunken bravado. "I do not care—we 'ave a drink instead, eh, M'sieur?"

"No, thanks."

"Then per'aps you could spare me some cigarettes?"

"Here"—he threw an unopened packet on the table, and as she lurched forward added: "You realize, of course, that little Butch is very ill."

The woman flopped on to a chair.

"He cough a lot, M'sieur—keep us awake at night."

"That's why I called—I've got something to talk over with you."

She was clawing at the cigarettes' cellophane wrapper and did not lift her ugly face:

"You are a doctor, M'sieur?"

"No."

"A missionary, maybe?"

"No."

She shrugged and held the packet forward:

"This silly paper, I cannot get it off. M'sieur, please——"

"I've a loose one here," he said, shuffling across the veranda.

"Take this."

After four attempts she finally succeeded in striking a match, then looked up at him, her small eyes sharp with animal cunning:

"Sit down, M'sieur."

"What I have to say will take only a few minutes," he said.

"It's about your son."

"So?"

"I'd like to take him off your hands for a while."

Her sagging lips tightened at the corners:

"Why you do that, M'sieur?"

"I'm very attached to little Butch and can offer him a good home."

"Ah—that." She waved her dirty hand. "It is not enough. We want 'im 'ere—he is a good boy."

"A dying boy, Madame."

"Ze cough, it will get better, M'sieur."

"You're wrong there." Gort was trying to keep his voice down, yet every word he uttered was edged with a deepening anger. "Tonight we visited Dr. Anderson, who left no doubt in my mind as to the true state of affairs. The little chap can't live much longer, Madame."

The smoke escaping from her flattened nostrils stopped for a few seconds, then as quickly resumed:

"You came here to frighten me, M'sieur," she muttered presently. "The boy, 'e is all right, and without 'im 'ow could we buy our things. No—no—I will not let 'im go."

"Not even for a consideration?"

"What you mean?"

"Payment—in dollars."

She was sprawled across the table, her naked breast pressed against its grease-coated timber. He watched Madame White make a supreme effort to straighten, fall, then slump forward:

"'Ow much you give me?" she asked. "'Ow much?"

"A hundred dollars."

Her lashless eyelids were closing, closing notwithstanding their owner's will.

"A little more, M'sieur. You are rich and can afford it."

"O.K.," he said, crushing underfoot the cigarette that had fallen from her fingers. "I'll make it a hundred and fifty, provided you are agreeable to let him stay with me for three months. How's that?"

"You take 'im now, M'sieur?"

"Immediately I get a decent place to live."

"And when you give me ze money?"

"On the day I call for him."

"It is good, M'sieur—very good."

Contempt filling his eyes, he stood listening to the woman's deep breathing; now she was asleep his desire was to get out of this filthy place, but concern for little Butch sent him

shuffling along the hall. On entering the first room on the left, he tarried for a moment to inspect the snoring wretch who lay spread-eagled on an unmade bed, held his torch close to the man's lacerated and bruised face. "You'll be O.K.," he muttered aloud, pushing Jake Larkins' head roughly into the filthy grey blanket. "Pity is she didn't finish you off properly."

He was in the hall again when a voice called:

"Is that you, M'sieur?"

"Sure is, feller."

"I'll get up."

"Stay where you are—I'm coming in."

As long as he lived Gort would never erase from his memory the picture confronting him as he threw open the door of little Butch's room. A white face, caught by joy, showed in the flashlight's yellow beam. Pain was there, too; sat deeply engraved, yet that pleasure born of youth's unsullied affection was creeping over it, spreading out as does a filmy cloud when struck by a tearing wind.

"Surprised? ' the man asked, flashing off his torch.

"Ah, M'sieur, I'm glad to see you—so very glad." The boy's voice was full of thankfulness. "I've been lying here wondering what had happened."

"Only for M'amselle Balant I'd have been dead meat by now—how's tricks?"

"I've been coughing a lot, and my chest is awfully tight."

"I'll sit on your bed," Gort said, feeling his way across the room. "We've got an important matter to settle—won't take long."

"M'sieur?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry you saw my mother like that. She's not always drunk, you know."

"Give me your hand, little guy."

"There, M'sieur."

"Swell—such a little hand, isn't it?"

"I'm very strong, though."

"Sure."

"Where's my mother now?"

"On the veranda."

"Asleep?"

"Hm, hm."

"Was she nice to you?"

"Of course."

"Mother was so pretty once, M'sieur—had such beautiful skin."

"So everyone tells me."

"It's true. Even I can remember the way she used to look—shall I get you her picture?"

"Not now," Gort muttered, rubbing the child's fingers vigorously. "How does that feel?"

"Nice."

"Know what I've decided to do, feller?"

"What, M'sieur?"

"Look after you—when I find a home."

There was a long silence. He knew little Butch was sitting up, could feel the boy's eyes on his face, felt their full power, and was not ashamed of the mist in his own. He swallowed hard before speaking:

"If you're worrying about your mother—don't. We'll see she gets along O.K."

The boy's fingers, though tightly clenched, were growing warm under Gort's:

"Wouldn't it be wrong for me to leave her now, though, M'sieur?" he asked presently. "She gets so sick and——"

"That's just what I'm thinking about," the man interrupted. "Both of you are ill and just now require a good long rest, but after a few months with me you'll be all right—understand?"

"You—you really want me to stay with you?"

"I'm all for it, feller—but what about you?"

"There's nothing I'd rather do, M'sieur—nothing."

"Then the whole thing's arranged," Gort murmured, gaining his feet. "All I've got to do is to find a home—see you tomorrow."

He was nearing the door when the child spoke: "M'sieur?"

"Well?"

"Can Angélique live with us too?"

The ripple's laugh held a forced ring:

"No, sir—this is an all-man's show."

"But she'll be able to visit us, won't she?"

"Any time."

"Good night, M'sieur."

"Good night, feller."

As Gort shuffled past Madame White he paused to place a five-dollar bill close by her dirty folded arms, but when she stirred he hurried outside to rid his heaving stomach of its bile.

CHAPTER XVII

THE crescent moon was waging a losing battle against a black cloud when, sweating freely from every pore, Gort reached Dr. Balant's neat white villa. He stood, torch in hand, for a full five minutes, debating whether or not to call at such an hour, but, urged on at last by the lights flooding all front windows, he pushed open the gate.

Knocking twice on the open door without response, he called:

"Anyone in?"

A voice, Angélique's, came to him from a room on his left:

"Is that you, M'sieur Saunders?"

"Yes, M'amselle. Are you in bed?"

Her gay laughter answered and, before he had completed a futile search for a cigarette, she was running towards him, running and tying the girdle of her gleaming cream-coloured satin dressing-gown.

"I must have dozed off," she explained, offering him both of her cool, soft hands. "I'm so sorry—do come in."

"I'm sorry for waking you." Gort was staring at Angélique as he had on their first meeting, yet his eyes, though full of admiration, were impersonal, had that clean, deeply impressed look of a man studying the face of a beautiful child.

Still gripping his hand, she led him forward, saying:

"Your apologies I do not hear, M'sieur, so come in—come in."

Grinning sheepishly, he was led into a comfortably furnished room. Several mats of similar design covered the highly polished floor, and everywhere he glanced huge bowls of flowers showed against pastel-blue walls; six lounge chairs in shell pink covers were placed about the room, accompanied by occasional tables on which rested ash-trays to create an atmosphere both warm and artistic.

"You've a nice place here," he said, waiting for her to release his fingers. "I like this colour scheme very much."

"It's Poppa's idea, M'sieur. He had it done just after I left for Paris."

"Very effective, too."

"Do sit down, M'sieur."

When he complied she sank into a chair opposite and for the first time appeared embarrassed by the severity of his gaze.

"You do not look well," she said, breaking the short silence. "Your face—it is so pale."

"It's been a trying day, M'amselle, and I'm tired—dog tired."

"Then would you care to lie down for a while?"

He shook his head while pushing it deeply into the centre of a clean-smelling cushion:

"You're very brave, M'amselle. I've read of men being awarded the Congressional Medal of Honour for less than what you did tonight."

"I was very scared for a while, though," she returned, her face quite serious. "Feared you would force me to let you go."

"I panicked, huh?"

"You were drowning, M'sieur—didn't know what you were doing."

His heavy lids flicked back. Under them the man's eyes were streaked by thick veins of blood.

"I've never been much good at saying things," he murmured, "bit too practical, I guess; but whatever happens I want you to know I'll never cease being grateful."

"Ah, it was nothing, M'sieur." She was smiling across at him. "Always I swim like one big fish and after you ceased struggling I had no trouble."

"That doesn't alter the fact of your saving my life."

"One day perhaps you do the same for me—yes?"

"I'd do my best, anyway."

Laughing, she slid from the chair and, after settling herself comfortably on a mat, asked:

"Where do you come from, M'sieur?"

"Two Springs, Kentucky."

"Kentucky." She repeated the name several times. Then suddenly he felt homesick as in a soft, crooning voice Angélique began singing that ever-popular Stephen Foster melody:

*"The sun shines bright on my old Kentucky home,
'Tis summer, the darkies are gay . . ."*

As a child of four Gort could recite without hesitation those much-loved words. They had been part of his nursery days, had remained with him along the road of life, yet never before

could he recall being affected by them. Angélique's voice, smooth as a silken thread, moved the man deeply, evoked memories which for years had remained dormant in his mind, opened for him forgotten vistas across which ghostlike figures moved. Danny Paul, Jim Nelson, Jenny Lynne, Gambler his first dog, Titch a gold-fish swimming leisurely in a big glass bowl, Sam a rooster, strutting proudly up and down surrounded by a dozen admiring hens. In rapid sequence these flashed past, college days, young manhood, people and little things, books, a baseball bat, a set of new golf clubs. The scene changed. Gone were the pleasant heart-stirring cameos. He was in Iwo Jima again, a strip of sand, men, some known to him, others just men, being mowed down in a deadly cross-fire, the sky full of darting, shooting planes, the earth heaving, carnage everywhere. Russ Cryson moving by his side shouting—

"M'sieur." Angélique was on her knees staring up at him in great alarm.

He sat bolt upright.

"Huh?"

"What were you thinking about?"

He passed a hand across his eyes:

"Iwo Jima—ever heard of it?"

"Often during the war—were you there, M'sieur?"

"Sure was."

"Hence your walking-stick, eh?"

"No—that came later."

"Accident?"

"Much less refined—a Communist bullet."

"Oh!" Her lovely face strained-looking, she resumed her position on the floor, sat with arms entwined about legs. "Did a Russian soldier shoot you for entering their zone?"

"Wrong again, M'amselle." His smile held that tenderness of an aged professor correcting a youthful pupil. "It happened in Korea."

"Ah, it is a silly war, M'sieur." Angélique's voice was very definite. "I've thought so right from the start. Could not understand why your President fell into Stalin's trap. First it was only North Korea to subdue, now China with her vast reservoir of manpower has stepped into the picture. Where will it all end, M'sieur?"

Gort leaned forward, elbows resting on knees. He was half inclined to challenge the statement, speak up in defence of Mr. Truman and say: "That's a short-sighted view, really.

Already practically the whole of Europe is under Russian domination—we saw it happening but could do nothing about it; but when Stalin said to his gang in North Korea 'Start shooting, boys,' we were forced to show our teeth." Logic and his ability to debate the question prompted him to express this view, but sitting there studying her face, transparent in its ebony background of shoulder-length hair, he could not bring himself to drag realities into the room. He just wanted to sit there and look at her.

Angélique spoke:

"General MacArthur—you've heard the news about him?"

"What news?"

"He's been dismissed—it came over the radio tonight."

"For heaven's sake!" he whispered. "For heaven's sake!"

"According to the announcer," she went on, "it was because of General MacArthur's failure to carry out the policy set down by the United Nations—I was most surprised."

"You and a few million others," he said, taking up his walking-stick from the floor. "Ma'm, that sure is something. Heard the news yourself, did you?"

"Oh, yes."

He stared at her, his grey eyes reduced to thin white slits by quivering half-closed lids:

"You are shocked, M'sieur. I can see that."

"Darned right, I am."

"Yet perhaps it is for the best," she said, watching him rise to his feet. "After all, generals, like the common soldier, must obey orders; but I too am sorry for him."

A half-grin crept along the man's lips:

"I think we'll hear a lot more about General MacArthur," he muttered. "Old soldiers don't take things lying down, not his kind anyway."

She smiled and, accepting his hand, leapt with the grace of a young doe to her feet, saying:

"Little Butch—you hear nothing about him, M'sieur?"

Gort's stick was following the outline of a pink hibiscus which some expert's hand had woven into the carpet for a base.

"I called at his place tonight, M'amselle—have you ever been there?"

"Not for some years."

"You're wise—filthy hole, isn't it?"

"I should have warned you against visiting that terrible

place," she muttered, walking with him to the door. "Did you see our little friend, M'sieur?"

"Yes."

"And how is he?"

"Not the best; complained of a pain in his chest."

"You've heard him coughing?"

"Much too often."

"I cannot understand what's happened to him," Angélique said with real concern. "Once he could outpace me in a climb and many times we swim to Iririki Island together, but now even a short walk leaves him distressed."

Gort came to a shuffling halt near the steps. He didn't quite know how to meet the situation and, while turning over what she had said, glanced skywards. It, he noted, was still packed with clouds, but directly above a patch of blue showed wherein a few stars and a watery moon sat huddled together.

"Even a short walk leaves him distressed" Angélique's words kept running through the man's thoughts. Why tell her, he mused; won't do any good. Anyway, she's bound to find out—not from you, though. Let someone else thrust the dagger into her heart—that's not your job. You've got to sit pat, let her go on believing—

He heard the sharp click of a latch, then her voice:

"It's my Poppa—I want you to meet him"

Muttering to himself in French, Monsieur Balant swayed towards them. Remorse had been heavy upon him all day, and the half-dozen pernod consumed during a brief visit to the club had added fuel to the fire of his torment.

"Quelle misère!" he was saying "Quelle misère!"

An embarrassment allied to hers swept through Gort as, standing there in the shadows, he watched Angélique step from the veranda and take her father's arm.

"Oh, Poppa!" she kept whispering. "Oh, Poppa!"

Gort waited some minutes, but when she failed to reappear, he breathed a low "Must be getting the old man to bed," and moved off.

When near the gate, however, her voice reached him:

"M'sieur!"

"I thought I'd better get along," he said, coming to a halt. "Anyway, time's getting on."

"Please do not judge Poppa as he is tonight." She seemed to be gliding rather than walking towards him. "He's upset because of what happened earlier—and is a poor drinker."

He pushed open the gate, but did not pass through.

i, M'amselle.

As his only child you did a very foolish thing, no matter how praiseworthy."

"With excellent results though, M'sieur," she defended wistfully. "Tonight Poppa had a good excuse for drinking, yet had it been otherwise little Butch's body and yours might have been washed up by tomorrow's tide."

"Perhaps yours, too, M'amselle."

"That is most doubtful. Only over the last few minutes did I feel really tired."

Frowning, he walked through the gate, closed it, then stood with his free hand gripped about one of its small spiked rails.

"I've some pleasant news for you, M'amselle."

"What, M'sieur?"

"I've come to an arrangement with Madame White for little Butch to live with me—when I find a home, of course."

In a quick gesture her hand went out and covered his, pressed it firmly, but beyond a whispered "Oh!" she did not speak.

"Do you approve?"

"Wholeheartedly!" Her voice was very low. "If you were to say to me: 'Wish for something and it will come true,' I'd ask nothing more than for little Butch to be taken away from those evil people." She paused to steady her trembling lips, then finished: "My only doubt, M'sieur, is you—your ability to look after him. Also why you should burden yourself with a delicate child."

"I had an idea you might query my motive," he returned, digging his walking-stick into the yielding earth. "After all, we are almost strangers, and——"

"Ah, please do not misunderstand me," the girl broke in hurriedly. "I meant no offence, nor do I doubt your motives, but is it not illogical for a badly wounded man to accept such a responsibility when neither honour nor circumstances demand that he do so?"

Gort was looking down at her in a quizzical sort of way:

"There are other factors to be considered, M'amselle. Compassion's one. It should outweigh everything else, but apart from that I've become very attached to little guy."

Her lips twisted themselves into an uncertain smile:

"We call him little Butch, M'sieur."

"I know."

"Yet you keep referring to him as little guy—it sounds so strange—particularly to me."

"Why to you?"

"Because I named him little Butch."

"I see." A boyish grin ran along his lips. "How come?"

"It happened a long time ago." Angélique was still pushing against the gate's loose latch. "As a child he loved playing butchers; even today there are make-believe shops in the bottom of our yard where we used to trade—a whole street full of them."

"You, of course, were the patient customer, eh?"

"Not always. On occasions I too became young again and was proprietress of a business which dealt only in rare orchids. These I bartered for choice cuts of steak, chops or even the humble sausage."

"Back home I controlled every railroad in the U.S.A.," he said, his voice warming like hers. "Later I turned my attention to automobiles, had both Henry Ford and General Motors by the throat before I was twelve."

"So among other things you are a brilliant financier, M'sieur."

"In the days when a handful of marbles could buy New York I was."

Smiling, she stepped back from the gate:

"I think little Butch will be very happy with you."

"It won't be my fault if he's not."

"And I'm glad you've decided to stay in Vila, too."

"You are?"

"Yes, very glad."

Gort flushed, and in a moment of confusion started down the hill. He didn't know why her compliment should embarrass him, but it did. He felt like a schoolboy who on prize day hears his name announced as *dux*—terribly self-conscious, but very proud. Ten shuffling steps were taken before he drew to a halt and turned.

"When we get settled I hope you'll come and visit us, M'amselle."

Her voice came from well back in the shadows:

"I'd love to, M'sieur—good night."

His hand closed over the torch. Pressing down the switch, he swung a feeble patch of light to where he imagined Angélique waited, but only the petals of frangipanni stark-white against their dark green foliage showed beyond the gate.

CHAPTER XVIII

GORT, who had breakfasted early, was sitting on the veranda of Madame Journez's hotel enjoying his first cigarette of that morning when he noticed a dilapidated jeep pull up to the accompaniment of squeaking brakes.

Having nothing better to do, he watched its driver, a short fair man of about forty-five, remove a dust-coated topee and, after running a handkerchief across his sun-tanned face, slide from behind the driving-wheel.

While passing, the stranger nodded in friendly fashion before disappearing through the open door. He was back in less than a minute, however—approached with his right hand extended.

"Terribly stupid of me," he said. "Should have recognized you right away. My name's Henshaw and you're Saunders—trifle early, aren't I?"

"So much the better," Gort returned, allowing the other to help him to his feet. "I'm ready when you are."

"That's marvellous." Henshaw's small blue eyes seemed out of place in their owner's youthful face. They looked tired and somewhat furtive as he went on speaking in short, clipped sentences. "Fine fellow, Sir George. Got a message through to me last night—shall we go?"

Gort threw an anxious glance towards the jeep. It was almost six months since last he had ridden in one; yet as he stood now in the hot morning sunlight, memories of another Englishman and a soft voice tugged at his mind. Sure, it all seemed a long time ago since Lieut. Cartwright had picked him up north of Seoul and—

"You'll be absolutely wild about Makeeta," he heard Henshaw say. "Wouldn't dream of getting out of it but for my wife. Cruel thing asthma, Saunders. She's down with it again, you know. Really dreadful to hear her."

Gort caught only a word here and there. Lieut. Cartwright and he were bumping along through the snow. God, how his shoulders burned! Couldn't be much further, though. Once over that hill and—

A somewhat puzzled Henshaw was speaking again:

"Copra prices are bound to rise. Labour's a bit stiff, of course. Lazy beggars won't work. Still plenty of money about, though."

Nice guy, Cartwright, the kind who had made England what she was. Probably scared stiff, but to listen to him one would think they were out on a joy ride. Funny the way he kept saying: "You know, old man," or "If you ask me, old chap"—made him want to laugh out loud. The hill, eh? Once over it they should sight Seoul, and—Christ, must get that wheel somehow. Cartwright, Cartwright——

"We're on even terms now." Henshaw was still trying hard to carry on a conversation. "Since the Communists got control of China, I mean. Up till then, the Froggies here had it all their own way. Imported batches of Tonkinese as labourers. Jolly good idea, really; bit tough on us chaps, though."

They had reached the jeep before Gort snapped out of his mood. This time he followed his companion's every word.

"Take your time, old chap—that stick, let me hold it."

Once seated, the passenger's personality changed. He even smiled when Henshaw jumped in beside him:

"How long have you had the old bus?"

"Going on four years—a disposals job. Bought it the first week I arrived here. Never given the slightest trouble."

"Pretty good, eh?"

"Oh, definitely."

Until they left the narrow road skirting Vila harbour both men were silent. Henshaw, intent on dodging numerous pot-holes, had been kept busy while Gort for his part was content to sit back and watch the sun-drenched earth go sliding past. Their jeep was nosing its way slowly along a palm-bordered track when Henshaw spoke:

"You're a bit closer to home now, Saunders."

"Why?"

"Well, your coves built this road. Hard to believe a few years ago it was twenty feet wide."

"Sure is," Gort agreed, leaning sideways and searching for the remaining ten feet. "Where's the rest gone?"

"Hidden beneath the jungle—smoke?"

"Thanks."

With both weeds alight, the shorter man asked:

"Been on that stick long?"

"About five months."

"You'll be able to chuck it away after a year here."

"Hope so."

"How does this part of the country appeal to you?"

"Vila?"

"No, what we're driving through now?"

"Very pretty."

"Then wait till you sight our valley—it's really beautiful."

They had covered another mile before Gort's sombre spirit started to thaw out. On rising he'd felt no enthusiasm for this journey because yesterday's reaction had permitted him only fitful sleep and, on waking, doubts persisted in prodding at his unsettled mind. Now they were retreating as under a canopy of interlocking palm fronds they began to climb.

"Man, that sure is something," he muttered five minutes later when Henshaw, with a "Well, here we are," applied the hand-brake.

The scene was one of intense beauty; so intense that it hurt and amazed because it was so real, and did not vanish in the blinking of an eye. Thousands of feet below amidst a riot of palm and flaming flowers, a small house stood at the base of a frowning mountain. Dwarfed, but undaunted by the creeping approach of an ever-possessive jungle, it squatted in the valley's heart like a white phantom ship becalmed on a sea of a hundred colours.

Along the mountain's broad shoulders poinsettia trees stabbed the dark green background with swords of scarlet, and from somewhere, hidden and delicate, came the exquisite and unmistakable perfume of frangipanni.

But to so much heart-throbbing beauty there must be an accompaniment, and this was to be found in the distant symphony of a waterfall, glinting like molten silver in the pale translucent tropical sun.

"I'm going to miss all this," Henshaw said, breaking the spell which held his companion. "Thought I'd go balmy for a while, though. I'd been used to the hustle and bustle of Hong Kong, but when Madge arrived I began to appreciate its quiet." The speaker's voice dropped: "Down there one gets closer to God, Saunders. I did anyway. That's my big regret for leaving here."

Gort's gaze swept the other's face. It held a strange expression, a mixture of pride, kept in check by lines of sadness.

"Then why sell?" he asked quietly. "Perhaps if you send your wife away for a while it might do the trick."

"Doesn't work. Madge went to England in '48 and last

year I packed her off to Australia. She came back looking marvellous both times."

"Yet the asthma recurred, eh?"

"Within weeks, and every attack seems to get worse."

"You'll return home, I suppose?"

"Rather." Henshaw's tired eyes brightened. "I've not seen the Old Dart since '39. Often wish I'd never left it."

"Why?"

"Well in '42 the Japs came along."

"You were caught in Hong Kong?"

"Both of us." The speaker's hands gripped about the driving-wheel tightened. "On the morning they herded us together my wife was a beautiful woman—expecting, too. When we met again in '45, I didn't recognize her. God, she looked dreadful, Saunders."

"And the baby?"

"Miscarriage."

"Rotten luck—had any children since?"

"We've tried hard enough."

A long silence fell between the two men. Henshaw sat slumped at the wheel, Gort staring, now across the valley, now down at his hands which had suddenly become clammy and feverish. He was thankful when at last the driver set the jeep into motion. It saved him from trying to think of something to say.

Five minutes later they were well into the valley. Huge rocks covered by a thick layer of light green moss sat between gorgeous masses of ferns, splashed here and there with brilliant colours. The air, cool after the humid heat of Vila, was balmy with perfume, not of flowers or violets, but something much stronger, yet by virtue of its elusiveness and pungency, strangely tantalizing to the nostrils. Palm fronds, their tips touching, made a dark-green sea of every slope and rise, stretched on as far as the eye could see in undulating grandeur.

Soon they were bumping along a clearance in the centre of which a white bungalow rose on high grey stilts. As the neat little house spread out before him, Gort's heart action quickened. Here, he thought, is the place we talked about on the way over, Sam. You couldn't visualize what I had in mind, but there it is, old-timer, there it is.

Henshaw drew his jeep to a halt near the front steps. Switching off the motor, he asked:

"Not disappointed, I hope, old chap?"

"No, sir," Gort whispered. "No, sir."

"You know that's one thing I admire about Americans," Henshaw said, hopping out of the vehicle. "You're much more frank with your emotions than we English. For instance, if you were the seller and I the buyer, I'd probably sit here and try to look unimpressed." He smiled. "Before reaching that front door I'd cite a number of reasons why Makeeta wouldn't suit me, then when you were really miserable I'd get big-hearted and offer to do business at my price. It's a fact."

Gort was still grinning:

"Reckon that's what makes us good allies, Mr. Henshaw. With your reserve and our enthusiasm we'll give Russia an awful kick in the pants one day—right enough, huh?"

"Bravo!"

They were crossing the drive when a sound brought the visitor to an abrupt stop:

"What's that?" he asked.

"My wife, fighting for breath. Makes your heart bleed to hear her, doesn't it?"

"Poor woman has asthma badly."

"That's why I'll not be able to show you our main bedroom," the smaller man explained. "My wife's terribly sensitive and—be careful of those steps, old man—they're a bit steep, you know."

.

It was after three o'clock when they started back for Vila. Gort, pre-occupied, did not encourage conversation, and Henshaw, saddened by the prospect of leaving Makeeta, proved most co-operative. His was that natural love a man sometimes has for a property. To him it did not constitute just an investment; he'd purchased it while still suffering the effects of the brutal treatment meted out to him while a prisoner of war. He was bitter, too, bitter against God, life and his fellow-men, but Makeeta had restored his faith, given him time to think and dream and forgive.

There were still scars on his back, deep scars left by bayonet and lash. Once he used to remain in the bathroom much longer than bodily cleanliness warranted, studying those ugly marks through a hand-mirror, cursing, giving vent to his outraged feelings, but for over two years now he'd hardly given them a thought. Makeeta had done all this to him, yet today . . . Little wonder Henshaw's whole interest

seemed absorbed in that narrow winding road reaching up from the valley he'd often referred to as "Paradise glimpsed through the crude eyes of man."

They were on high ground in sight of the sea when Gort spoke:

"Your boys, will they stop on?"

Henshaw was dusting the windscreen with a piece of rag:

"Jimmy will, I know—not so sure about the other two."

"Then what do you advise?"

"I'd have a yarn to Sir George—he'll get you a new team. However, you've nothing to worry about until the coconuts begin to fall."

"When's that?"

"June usually."

Gort lit two cigarettes and, handing one to his companion, asked:

"Reckon you're none too happy about selling Makeeta, Mr. Henshaw."

The other laughed shortly:

"Fact of the matter is I'm awfully damned miserable. Had a lump in my throat when you handed me that thousand-dollar deposit. Pleased it's yours, though. Would have hated one of the Froggies to get the old place."

"There's no hurry about your getting out, you know. I can wait."

"Thanks all the same, but now Makeeta's gone I'd rather you take over as quickly as possible. My wife feels the same way too."

"Suits me—how long should it take the sale to go through?"

"A few weeks—meanwhile, we'll stay with some friends in town."

"When do you aim on doing that?"

"Friday at the latest."

"Then if I arrange to pay the outstanding nine thousand dollars to your solicitor tomorrow, would you have any objection to my moving in on Saturday?"

"Not in the least, old fellow."

"Say—that's fine!" the passenger exclaimed, giving his companion an enthusiastic slap on the back. "Sure is."

Their jeep was lurching along Erakor Road when Gort, struck by an overwhelming desire to share the news of his purchase of Makeeta with little Butch, asked:

"Mind if I leave you here?"

Henshaw brought the vehicle to a rolling stop.

"You're quite happy about the deal, Saunders?"

"Right up to my ears—what time shall I meet you to-morrow?"

"Ten-thirty—at your hotel."

"Fine—thanks for everything."

"Good-bye, old chap."

Walking at a pace surprising for one so badly handicapped, Gort shuffled along through the late afternoon. The track he followed was new to him, its grade steep, yet excitement had given to his feet a confidence not experienced since Korea.

Great things were happening to him. His heart, heavy this morning, was now light, kept pounding madly, and a smile he was not aware of lay wrapped around the man's lips.

During the drive back he had made big decisions, decisions which pleased him immensely. He had pondered on the grim side, too: little guy, old Sam and his own sterile body. But momentarily these were pushed aside, had given way to pleasurable musing.

Twenty minutes later, however, finding himself standing at the gate of Dr. Balant's house, he came back to earth with a suddenness that jarred. You're slipping, feller, he remonstrated silently while backing away. Got out of Henshaw's jeep to make a call, but you didn't intend coming here, did you? Turned softy that's your trouble. This girl's only got to glance your way and you blush like a silly boy. Go on, admit it. Fallen in love with her, haven't you? No! Then what in the hell are you doing right now? Sure, sure, we all know you're making a hasty retreat, but it's too late now, you fool—too late.

Angélique came up the hill carrying a wide-brimmed cream straw hat in one hand, a basket of fruit in the other. She was humming a tune, and every few steps her small sandalled feet moved in a girlish hop to keep time with the song's rapid metre.

Under the light of lantern and crescent moon Gort had been made aware of his masculine clumsiness in Angélique's presence, but seeing her for the first time by daylight, with a dying sun rippling her lovely head into waves of glistening ebony, was an experience he would always cherish.

"This afternoon we looked for you, M'sieur," she said, placing the basket at her feet. "Asked many people, but no one could help. You've been out of town—yes?"

He nodded but did not meet her laughing eyes:

"That's right—I left quite early to inspect a place called Makeeta—you probably know it."

"Makeeta"—she repeated the name as that of an old friend. "Oh, yes, yes—very well. It's in the valley I was telling you about—the Valley of Sounds."

In his great moment Gort sought the backing of a cigarette. He knew what he was about to say would please her, yet manlike did not hasten the revelation. At her soft "No, thank you, M'sieur," he lit a weed, then blew a quick puff of smoke skywards.

"The trip today did me a heap of good, M'amselle—I'll never forget it."

"Yet you saw only part of our valley." Her face was serious now. "About a mile past Makeeta there is a little track on the left. Follow it and you will find a miniature Garden of Eden."

"When were you last there, M'amselle?"

"On the Sunday before I left for France—little Butch, Poppa and I had a wonderful day. We were all like children."

"Is the place you speak of far from the road?"

"Two miles—maybe less."

"Pretty rough going, I suppose?"

"One must tread carefully when skirting the ravines below which it lies, M'sieur."

"That leaves me out, I guess."

Her eyes, green as the sea on a summer morning, were fixed on his face:

"Leaves you out? I do not understand."

"Well, I mean"—he smiled—"these old legs of mine, they don't climb very well."

"Oh!" Angélique's gaze moved instinctively downward, but for once Gort was not embarrassed. He wondered why.

"Ah, M'sieur," he heard her say, "I'm so sorry."

"Sorry?"

"Yes, for being so inconsiderate—I should not have done that. You're——"

He laughed and tapped the stick against his legs:

"They're getting stronger every day, M'amselle. What's more, I've quit being sensitive—in the company of friends, anyway."

"Then I did not hurt you?"

"Not a bit."

"Ah, that is good." Her lips, red and moist, broke into a

half-smile. "My poor heart, it says 'Thank you very much.' You come inside—yes; have dinner with us."

Everything in Gort pleaded with him to accept, but after a brief hesitation he shook his head:

"Some other time. I've Mother's last letter to answer and later intend calling on Madame White."

She frowned and picked up her basket:

"You'll have a visitor tonight, M'sieur."

"Madame White?"

"No, little Butch. I left him only a short while ago. He's very unhappy."

"Why?"

"He'll tell you all about it tonight," she said, moving slowly past him. "I——"

"Do you know what happens on Saturday, M'amselle?"

"What, M'sieur?"

"Little guy and I are going places—I've even got his room picked out."

Angélique's back was still turned on him:

"Where, M'sieur?"

"Makeeta—I paid a deposit on it today." He watched her lithe body straighten, then swing his way. The surprise in her eyes he had expected, but not their tears or——

"You've—you've bought Makeeta, M'sieur?" she whispered.

"It is your very own?"

"And little guy's—yours, too, whenever you care to visit us—Angélique."

Her damp eyes followed his first twenty or so shuffling steps. She wanted to run after him, to stand in his path and say: "I never knew my name sounded so pretty before, M'sieur—I really didn't," but by the time his dragging feet had carried him ten yards she was incapable of uttering a single word.

On reaching Madame Journez's Gort did not go to his room; instead, he sat on a rock near the water's edge and allowed his eyes to wander at will. Out there the sun was burning a hole in the far distant horizon where it was welded with the sea, an immense sun fiercely burning its way out of sight, spraying the west with molten gold and copper. Along the surface of the sea fires played in a maze of colour beyond description, reaching nearer and nearer as the arrogant king lowered himself further and further to rest, reaching past the long silhouetted finger at Devil's Point to the very shore

against which a rising tide lapped with quiet sighs as though the ocean itself was ready to sleep.

Soon the only movement out there was a slender trail of smoke. It, too, looked tired, seemed to float from the ship's funnel and drift listlessly to the blazing west; the smoke and now five canoes, toys with mechanical paddling figures, sliding across the burning sea. Suddenly Gort knew that both Vila and he had spent their energies. Instead of the noisome laughter and shouts of natives, instead of the sing-song calls of Tonkinese, instead of the restless movement of men going about their affairs, there was a stillness, complete and eerie.

By now the sun had become a mere golden arc amid all that fantasy of colour and from the canoe a strange sound drifted inshore in waves half-joyful, half-sorrowful, as mission boys made their way home. Strange uncertain lights shot up into the sky, lights coloured with the abandon and beauty only the Supreme Being can achieve. Within minutes they too were gone, leaving a weird half-glow to hover over the world. Then it was night, a heavy all-enveloping blanket of darkness penetrated only by long stabbing rays of far-away stars.

The ship was no longer visible, had been replaced by a dozen gleams escaping from illuminated cabins, a little universe suspended between heaven and dark waters.

Lighting a cigarette, Gort blew a smoke-ring towards Iririki Island, now dissolved into a single eye of light coming from a window of the Resident Commissioner's house. Presently he spoke aloud:

"My destiny is here, Sam, I know it; can feel it with every breath I take—so long, old-timer."

CHAPTER XIX

HE had just begun the third page of his letter to Mrs. Saunders when little Butch, carrying a thin brown kelpie pup, stepped out of the night. A heart-tearing picture, Gort thought, placing aside his pad and regarding the visitors with mock surprise.

He did not know which of the two looked more pathetic. Little Butch, his hair neatly combed for once, stood balanced on one foot, while the other moved slowly up and down its owner's left shin. His face, colourless as a wax mask, was caught by a smile which, though warin, did not succeed in lifting the shadows of suffering from the child's eyes.

The puppy, its small head resting lightly on little Butch's arm, appeared to find interest in Gort also: ears half-cocked, moist nose wrinkled, and eyes light-brown in colour were turned towards the man who, muttering a quiet "Say, what have we here?" rose from the bed.

"She is mine, M'sieur—a chap from that schooner out there gave her to me on my way home this afternoon. She's very sweet."

"A lady, uh," Gort murmured, running his hands over the dog's protruding spinal column. "What's her name?"

"The man said she didn't have one."

"Then what do you suggest we call her?"

"Do you like Maria?"

"Sounds all right to me."

"I think it's very nice," little Butch agreed, placing his charge on the floor. "Do you know why, M'sieur?"

"No."

"Well, you see, it was the first name I ever heard."

"Go on—how long ago, feller?"

"When I was quite young," the child said after a short pause. "I remember Daddy dressed up in soldier's clothes rushing into the big lounge-room we used to have and saying to Mother: 'Sicily's fallen, Maria. The war can't last much longer, darling.'"

"Where were you living those days, little guy?"

"Calcutta—have you ever been there?"

"No."

"Our house was large, M'sieur—had such a lot of rooms."

"Is that so?"

"And we had servants, four of them."

Gort's eyes followed the dog as she moved about the room, sniffing at several bags standing near an old-fashioned washstand, complete with jug and chamber. He sighed before asking:

"What year was your father killed, feller?"

"Early in 1945, M'sieur."

"You remember him, though?"

"From the moment he told Mother about the war, I remember everything, M'sieur—everything."

Maria had located a pair of Sam's old felt slippers and was bedding down for the night when little Butch spoke:

"Lady dogs make the best pets, you know; they've got a much better disposition—anyone will tell you that."

Laughing quietly, Gort sat down on the bed, gestured for his companion to do likewise, but the child shook his head.

"I came to discuss a serious matter, M'sieur," he said, "and would rather stand, if you don't mind."

"Nothing gone wrong at home, I hope?"

"No."

"In that case your problem can wait—I've something really exciting to tell you."

"What, M'sieur?"

The man clapped his hands together.

"On Saturday we move, little guy. How does that strike you?"

"Move—but I——"

"Now let me do the talking," Gort interrupted, leaning forward. "We're partners, see—owners of a plantation you know well, but I'm keeping its name a secret until later." The speaker laughed again. "When I called at your place last night I had no idea where we were going to live—was determined to find some place, mind you, yet believed it would take time—a few weeks at least. Now everything's arranged. We've a swell home, cute like a doll's house, and there's a garden—say, what's eating you up, feller?"

The boy's face, twisted with emotion, was turned away.

"I'm—I'm afraid I'm going to cry, M'sieur."

"Cry?" Gort's voice was still at a triumphant pitch. "Wager you'll be laughing when I tell you where our new home is."

"I do, M'sieur—I do."

"Oh!—you've seen Angélique?"

"Yes—she was waiting for me on the corner."

"Well, aren't you pleased?"

"For you." Little Butch appeared to be struggling hard for words. "But I can't leave Mother alone with that awful man, M'sieur. She is sick and needs me—please say you understand."

Had an unseen hand struck Gort down, his face could not have registered more surprise. It was a study in disappointment, grew longer and older as second succeeded second. You can't have heard right, he told himself, while watching the youngster moving round the bed, but he knew he had, knew that Madame White, as she floundered in the vilest depths of human degradation, would be assured of this pathetic child's affection. The thought hurt. To him Madame White was beyond the pale, a drunkard, unclean, horrible. She had pushed decency aside, lived for years with a creature so evil as to make one's senses reel, yet from this cesspool of shame a boy's soul had emerged unsullied, fresh, clean and beautiful. It seemed to be floating about the room on tired wings when Gort roused himself.

"When did you make the big decision, little guy?"

"Early this morning, M'sieur."

"After talking things over with your mother, I suppose."

"No—before then."

"I see—what did you have for breakfast this morning, feller?"

"I wasn't, hungry, M'sieur."

"Which means you had nothing?"

"Yes."

"And lunch?"

"Roast chicken."

"Where?"

"At Angélique's house."

The man was lost in thought for a time, and when next he glanced up little Butch stood near the door, dabbing at his eyes with a frayed handkerchief.

"There's no need to be upset," Gort said reassuringly.

"I'm not crying, am I?"

"But you're a man, M'sieur, and I'm so very sad."

"Don't feel like laughing myself," the other confessed, leaning back against a badly chipped enamelled bed-frame.

"I kinda had things all worked out—you know how it is."

"Last night I couldn't sleep for thinking over what you said," little Butch returned, wiping his cheeks free of their tears, "but this morning when I found Mother asleep on the floor, her dress all torn down the front, I knew everything I'd been dreaming about wouldn't come true. That's why I decided to stay and look after her."

When he spoke the man's upper lip trembled slightly.

"And who's going to look after you?"

"I'll manage all right, M'sieur."

"Alone—with those two people?"

"Yes."

"And what happens if you get sick?"

"I'll not get sick. My cough's getting better every day."

"It won't if you make a habit of missing breakfast—must eat, you know."

"I——" The words on little Butch's lips were brushed aside by a spasm of violent coughing. Shaking from head to foot, he made for the door, reached it just in advance of Gort, who with a distressed "I've got hold of you, feller," thrust his handkerchief into the child's feverish hand.

The short, though vicious attack was just over when a voice coming from the shadows made them turn:

"I was passing when the coughing started," Sister Almond said, pausing on the threshold. "It was dreadful—dreadful."

"I'm fine now," little Butch returned. "Sorry about your handkerchief, M'sieur. Do let me take it home and wash——"

"Like hell you will," the other interrupted in a flat voice. "Who cares about a handkerchief, anyway?"

Sister Almond's gaze played between the faces of man and child. They were a tragic pair, she thought; one, his feet planted wide apart, depending on a walking-stick for balance; the other beautiful beyond description, yet dying and——

Gort spoke:

"If I ever catch you out again at night, know what I'm going to do, feller?"

"No, M'sieur."

"Kick you in the pants—catch on?"

"Mr. Saunders is right, dear," Sister Almond said, taking a packet of cigarettes from her pocket. "You should be in bed. I really mean that."

The youngster's big blue eyes were looking straight at Gort.

"I had to see you, though, didn't I, M'sieur?"

"What you had to tell me could have waited." The man's

tone, though sharp, was more distressed than angry. "Another thing, you should wear woollen singlets. This going about half-naked has got to stop."

"Wear wool on a night like this?" little Butch queried, fingering nervously a button on his shirt. "It's so hot, and——"

"All the more reason why you should be wearing singlets, feller. I'll buy half a dozen tomorrow. Make sure you wear them, too."

"Half a dozen, M'sieur. Oh, no, please."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't possibly wear all those at once."

"Mr. Saunders didn't mean that, dear," Sister Almond explained quite seriously. "It's only necessary to wear one at a time."

Blonde head nodding in understanding, the child moved over to where Maria slept contentedly on old Sam's slippers. He squatted there for a long minute, stroking the puppy's mangespotted ears. "Poor wee thing," he kept saying, "poor wee thing."

"Sure you wouldn't like to stay the night?" Gort asked when, after a final pat, his young friend picked up the dog. "It's O.K. by me if you do."

The child wanted to decline, wanted to say "No, M'sieur, thank you very much." How, though, when that awful cough was tearing at his throat? But he did the next best thing—threw them both a smile before stepping into the protecting arms of an all-enveloping darkness.

Guided by coughing, they followed little Butch's flight, followed him across the yard and along the road, followed him until eventually merciful distance shut from their ears that choking sound.

"I feel like a drink," Sister Almond said when Gort seemed inclined to remain standing at the door for hours. "A good stiff whisky might cheer me up."

"Me, too," he confessed, throwing a hand towards the dressing-table. "It's over there, Sister. Will you do the honours?"

She poured him almost half a glass, repeated the dose for herself, then laughed.

"Don't be surprised if this puts me on my little pink ear—whisky usually does, unfortunately."

He was still staring into the night.

"There's some brandy in that right-hand drawer if you prefer it."

"No, thanks." She held a tumbler forward. "Here's yours—mind if I sit?"

"Not at all—put any water in mine?"

"Why spoil it?"

With a deep frown creasing his brow, he sank on to the bed, then met her amused brown eyes:

"Trying to get me drunk, are you, Sister?"

"Any objections?"

"Reckon not—drink much?"

"Very little—do you?"

"Get on it sometimes."

"When depressed or otherwise?"

"Otherwise, mostly."

"I'm different," she said, sipping at the fiery liquid. "Normally I hate this stuff—its taste, I mean—but get me really blue and I'm a horse of another colour."

"And that's how you're tonight, eh?"

"Definitely." The woman's lips were smiling with her eyes now. "Whisky brings out the worst in me, so you'd better be careful, Mr. Saunders."

Her facetious statement left him cold, for he only grinned and asked:

"What's on your mind?"

"Little Butch. Every time I see him lately my morale goes sliding downhill."

"This might sound screwy to you," Gort returned while placing a pillow at his back, "but I've already written him off. Tonight, for instance, I wasn't talking to a living being. To me he's already dead, has been since that night I took him to Dr. Anderson." The speaker shrugged. "If ever Vila's been visited by a kid angel, it's little guy—the only thing he lacks is a pair of silver wings, and I'm not kidding either."

Sister Almond's gaze left his face, was fixed on the amber fluid rolling from side to side in her glass:

"You believe there's such a place as heaven, then, Mr. Saunders?"

"A month ago I didn't."

"But you do now?"

"I'm kinda getting around to it."

"How come?"

"That's very difficult to explain, Sister. Until I started at Duke 'Varsity I was a firm believer in the hereafter, didn't have a doubt in my mind. Then for years I went along, let's call it a middle road, sometimes mentally questioned its

existence and at others was all for what I'd read in the Good Book." Gort paused, leaned well back against the pillow, and resumed: "Nineteen forty-two found me unchanged; nearly every Sunday morning I accompanied Mother to church, felt the humbleness all people experience while kneeling in a holy place, or listening to the voices of men, women and children singing hymns. However, World War Number Two left me lacking in a lot of things. Still went to church, mind you, but I didn't get a kick' out of it any more. While our preacher was giving his sermon my thoughts drifted off to places I'd been, places where only the guns of man spoke and hate followed a guy's every step. Came Korea. Even now I don't know what made me rush in for another mental hiding; maybe I was bored with those postwar years. Could have been because things didn't turn out as I had planned they would. Jenny—" The speaker halted, finished off his drink in one gulp, and proceeded: "Anyway, to Korea I went, copped the works and came out of it more atheist than Christian."

Sister Almond lifted her eyes. Under their dark-brown orbs humour was spreading itself:

"Surely this place hasn't resurrected your faith, Mr. Saunders?"

"Not completely, but I find myself strolling along that middle road again."

"Neither for nor against, eh?"

"Sort of."

"But what changed you?"

"Sam's death, I guess—that and some of the folks here."

"Such as?"

"Little guy." Gort's head was lifted from the pillow. "Laughing at me, aren't you, Sister?"

"With you."

"Meaning?"

"I listened to a man who was almost as convincing as you are, a long time ago. He ended up by taking me for a plain ordinary sucker." She smiled across at him. "That's the word, isn't it?"

"Depends what you're trying to convey."

Sister Almond swallowed a mouthful of whisky, shuddered as one usually does when unaccustomed to neat spirit, then laughed: "As you already may have gathered, I'm a very cynical young woman, Mr. Saunders."

"I've not noticed it."

"Well, I am—thanks to one of your countrymen."

"You don't say."

"I most earnestly do," The woman's eyes had taken on a strange coldness. "Brom was a bit like you in a way: good-looking, excellent conversationalist, plus a boyishness which could knock down most barriers—mine included."

"You fell in love with him?"

"Worse—we were married on the 20th of December, 1943."

"I'll be doggoned!" Gort had risen to a sitting position.

"That sure is a shock to me, Sister."

"I knew it would be."

"Where did Brom hail from?"

"Texas. In 1946 I had everything arranged to sail, when a letter from his attorney arrived. I've been cynical ever since."

"It was that kind of letter, huh?"

"The most heartless document I've ever read."

"Hell—why?"

"Well, among other things I was accused of making no endeavour to join my husband and would be divorced forthwith." She smiled. "I was still hysterical when poor Mother returned from town, hours later. Put on a terrible show, I believe."

Without speaking, Gort watched his companion pour herself another drink, then stand studying its colour against the swinging oil lamp around which hundreds of small insects circled. In her distress she had become quite pretty, he thought. There were no tears in her eyes, yet hurt had loosened her erstwhile small mouth, given it a tremor and moisture which stirred him to pity.

"Better slow down a bit," he advised presently. "You're drinking neat whisky, remember."

"Who cares?"

"Your head with tomorrow."

"My worries—I'm not on duty till 5 a.m."

"Off all night, eh?"

"Yes—interested?"

"You don't really want me to answer that, do you?"

"Might after I've had a few more of these."

"Sister?"

"Well."

"How'd you get over here?"

"By canoe, of course."

"And where did you leave it?"

"Just along the beach—why?"

"I just wanted to know, that's all."

"Think I'm getting drunk, don't you?"

"No—merely sounding a warning."

"I'm over twenty-one, Mr. Saunders."

"Sure you are—smoke?"

"Thanks."

As Gort held out the packet his finger-tips made contact with hers. They were cold, clammy as a corpse not long dead.

"Say," he muttered, striking a match, "you're frozen. Feel all right?"

She inhaled deeply at the cigarette.

"Of course—let me pour you another drink."

"Nothing doing—I'm sitting on this one."

"Got you scared, haven't I?"

"Scared?"

"Yes. But you're quite safe. I'm a very moral person, really."

His eyes slipped from hers to the doorway, against which, the tropic night leaned dark and voiceless. While speaking he rose:

"You could have saved your breath. You've been hurt, so have I. That's why I know how you feel."

The words had a soothing effect on Sister Almond. For the first time in minutes her shoulders dropped to a relaxed position and the face she turned to him, though still a trifle pale, was composed.

"I think you're a nice bloke," she said, placing aside her glass. "And that, coming from an Aussie, means something"

"Sure does." He was grinning self-consciously. "Where do you come from?"

"New South Wales. I was born at a place called Wagga Wagga."

"Cute name."

"Cute place, too."

"I spent a few months in Sydney during the last show," he rejoined, watching her take up a scarf from the chair. "We were billeted at Bondi and, being summer, I spent most of my leave on the beach. Man, did I get a colour up!"

"Bondi." She whispered the word as one does when commencing a poem. "Oh, gosh, don't make me feel homesick, Mr. Saunders—don't, please."

"Sorry."

Sister Almond smiled and walked with him to the door, but when he made to follow her across the threshold she lifted a protesting hand.

"There's no need for you to bother—my canoe's only a few yards from here."

"No trouble at all. Do you think I should get my torch?"

"Hardly worth it," she said, linking her arm through his. "Do you mind?"

"Friends, aren't we?"

"You bet."

They covered the first twenty or so paces in silence. Sister Almond kept taking in deep breaths of the humid salt-tanged air, he stabbing at the soft earth with his stick in the fashion of a blind man.

She spoke first:

"You haven't managed to find a home yet, I suppose?"

"Believe it or not, I did—today."

"Oh!—where?"

"In the Valley of Sounds—sure am excited about it."

"How marvellous! What's the place like?"

"A dream house sitting in the prettiest setting I've ever seen."

"A plantation, of course."

"Hm, hm—small, though."

"And how far out?"

"About five miles."

Her finger-tips were tapping against his wrists.

"Little Butch—he'll be going with you?"

"No."

"But——"

"He'll not be coming—says he's got to stay and look after his mother."

"Poor kid."

"Could have cried when he told me, but the longer I think about it the more I know he's right."

"So you'll be on your own again?"

"Yes."

"It won't be too lonely for you?"

"Hard to say."

"Know anything about plantations?"

"No, but I'll learn."

"That's the idea." She drew him to a halt at a spot where the incoming tide brought a gentle lapping sound from partly submerged rocks. "Gorgeous night, isn't it, Mr. Saunders?"

"Delightful. Pity there's no moon, though."

"For myself, I'm pleased."

"Why?"

"Because I've grown to hate that mass of ramshackle buildings girdling the harbour—they're so ugly."

"You're too critical."

"Perhaps I am." She laughed and unhooked her arm from his. "I'd better be getting along now. Thanks for the drink, your company, too, of course."

"It was nice having you."

She stepped on to the sand and a few seconds later he heard her fiddling about with the canoe.

"Anything wrong, Sister?"

"I couldn't find my torch—have it now though."

"Want a push?"

"Heavens no! I'm an old hand at this."

"Sister?"

"Yes."

"When you see Doc Anderson tell him he'll soon have an iron lung at the hospital."

"How?"

"A gift from old Sam—in dollars."

"But——"

"I'll have little guy take me over to the island tomorrow. It can all be fixed up in a few minutes."

"Mr. Saunders?"

"Well?"

"I think you're an extremely nice bloke now."

"It's old Sam's money, not mine," Gort said, swishing at the darkness with his stick. "So I'd like it to be called the 'Sam Murphy iron lung.'"

"Don't worry,—it shall be."

"Swell."

Phosphorescent glory swept before and behind the first sweep of her dipping paddle.

"You've made me very happy tonight," she called back at his shadowy figure. "As for Doc Anderson, he'll be like a dog with two tails—he really will."

"Old Sam should get a kick out of it too, Sister."

"And we'll see you tomorrow?"

"In the afternoon some time."

"That's grand—bye now."

"Good night."

Gort waited until those brilliant swirling eddies of light faded to a mere shimmer, then with a low "Strange person," he turned and walked towards his room.

CHAPTER XX

FOLLOWING a custom developed during the Second World War, Mrs. Saunders was waiting at her front gate when Steve Hendred, the local postman, turned into West Avenue. Anxious for news of Gort, she followed the old man's course along the road, consequently did not notice Jenny Lynne and Amber May coming from the opposite direction. They were only a few paces away when their approaching footsteps attracted her attention.

"Well," she greeted, opening the gate. "How are you both?"

"We had quite a nice time in New York," the younger woman said. "Amber May was so thrilled, weren't you, honey?"

The child, an attractive titian-haired girl of five, tugged at the sleeve of her mother's frock.

"Tell Nanna about what we did at Coney Island, Mummy."

"My, my; so you were there." Mrs. Saunders was looking most impressed. "Isn't that wonderful?"

"I rode a big 'os, Nanna."

"Did you really?"

"And—went down the big dipper too."

"How thrilling—who with?"

"Uncle Harry—I was terribly scared at first, though." So saying, Amber May skipped off across the lawn in search of Tim, a Persian cat who, more often than not, was to be found in the Saunders' garage.

Jenny Lynne's eyes followed her child when she spoke:

"Strange how she always calls you Nanna, isn't it, Ma?"

Mrs. Saunders' gaze was fixed on the postman, who at that moment had paused before Ben Jennings' mail-box.

"Yes—yes, it is—very odd."

"Gort, how is he?"

"Loves the tropics—you heard about poor old Sam?"

"Mother wrote to me about it, Ma."

"We were all terribly upset and—"

"I've got a long letter for you this morning," the postman interrupted, sliding an envelope from the pile in his hand.

"Good day to you, Jenny. Bit raw, ain't it?"

The younger woman did not smile or comment—she just

stood there watching that letter, around which her heart was wrapped, being delivered.

"From Gort, isn't it, Ma?"

"Hm, hm. Let's go inside, dear."

A log fire was throwing a ruddy glow across the lounge-room when Jenny Lynne, having seated herself in what she knew to be her ex-fiancé's favourite chair, said:

"This reminds me of 1944, Ma—our sitting here and Gort thousands of miles away. Remember how we used to read his letters to each other?"

Mrs. Saunders' fingers were poised ready to tear open the envelope, but at the question they remained fixed:

"Of course I do," she smiled sadly. "Shall I read you what he has to say?"

"Oh, yes, please."

Still smiling, the older woman tore open the letter, was about to commence when Jenny Lynne spoke: "It goes without saying that you skip anything personal, Ma—promise?"

"I don't think you'll find a single paragraph here I'll not be able to read aloud," Mrs. Saunders said, taking her glasses from the arm-rest. "Gort's no longer the romantic young man you knew. In practically every letter I've received from Vila he's mentioned a girl by the name of Balant, but you can take it from me there's absolutely nothing in it."

"On the contrary, I know he'll fall in love again." The voice sounded like that of a drowning woman shouting for help. "This girl—what's her name again?"

"Balant."

"Who is she?"

"The daughter of a retired French doctor—she's been very kind to Gort."

"Pretty, I suppose."

"Very—shall I read now, dear?"

"Perhaps you'd better glance through it first, Ma."

"Nonsense—here we go."

"Dear Mother,

"So much has happened since my letter of last week that I don't know where to start. Having written at length about my taking over Makeeta, the beauty of this valley and numerous other reactions to yours truly becoming a planter, one would think that my source of information had just about reached exhaustion point, yet such an assumption would be far from the truth.

"Every day something happens which is worth recording

on paper, precious tit-bits that must quicken the pulse of any columnist; yet being at my best a poor correspondent, I can write things only as I see and feel them.

"On the morning Mr. Henshaw drove me out to inspect Makeeta we stopped at a spot which offered a wonderful view of this valley. I'll not forget either it or Mr. Henshaw's words, when from out of the blue he said: 'Down there one gets closer to God, Saunders.' This simple statement coming, as I'm sure it did, direct from a man's heart, made a great impression on me; in fact, even now as I lie in bed hovering between wakefulness and sleep, those words float through my mind like an echo from an almost forgotten world.

"After Korea, as you know, I turned my back on God, used to ask myself: 'What's He done for you?' or 'If there's a Supreme Being, why doesn't He do something about all this rottenness going on down here?' In short, I was fast becoming an atheist, but not now. These days such questions never strike a discordant note on the harp strings of my inner conscience, for around me beauty has spread itself with nature's blessing, and instead of doubting the Deity's existence I find myself thanking Him for having guided my shuffling feet into this garden paradise.

"Perfection, I once read, is the unattainable, a philosophy I've learnt to respect since living at Makeeta, for here I found everything but a remedy for pain, not physical pain, Mother, my old tummy seems to be getting stronger every day, but if it came to a show-down I'd willingly accept those minutes of agony I once suffered if it were in my power to prolong considerably the life span of little guy.

"Nothing I've experienced in the past has affected me so profoundly as this pathetic child. Don't ask me why, I couldn't tell you; perhaps it's because he was the first one I met after old Sam died, or perhaps, having been denied any prospect of paternity, I saw in him the answer to my own humiliating dilemma. Whatever the reason, the fact emerges I've grown to love him with an affection few men could claim for another's offspring. This emotion was naturally accentuated on the night Doc Anderson told me about the boy's malady and the many hours I've spent with him since then have deepened my hurt.

"It's a dreadful thing to sit by a child's side in bright sunlight or wander under a shady canopy of palms, his hand in yours, and be thinking: 'He's getting thinner, paler every day—can't last much longer.'

"Thus you sight, Mother, the only cloud hanging over this valley—tear it aside, push it over those green-covered mountains and an earthly paradise is yours for the coming. Why not join me, honey? I know you'd be very happy at Makeeta—it's really beautiful and, being only a short distance from Vila,

one can drive to town whenever the urge to do so strikes. Anyway, please think it over.

"I had a letter from Doctor Anderson yesterday. He informed me that the iron lung is already on its way from the States and should arrive here any day. He's a swell guy—has arranged for one of the hospital's private rooms to be named after old Sam. Needless to say, I was most appreciative.

"Now for the big news."

Here Mrs. Saunders paused, glanced hurriedly through the remaining paragraphs, then with an embarrassed "That wouldn't interest you, dear," turned over two pages and without meeting Jenny's eyes resumed her reading:

"Had a rather weird experience last night—I'd only been in bed a few minutes when I heard what I thought at first to be someone tapping on the veranda. Getting my torch, I went to investigate and almost died of fright on seeing a shell twice the size of my fist moving towards me. This was startling enough, but a closer examination revealed of all things a lobster-like creature with a huge claw propelling its shell-house my way. For a while I was too fascinated to act (fascinated or scared, I don't know which). When, however, it got within a few feet of the door I struck it with my stick. Realizing at length the futility of such tactics, I picked up ugly guy and chucked him over the veranda. He was still there this morning, large as life, sunning himself on the lawn when I approached with my house-boy, who informed me in quaint pidgin English: 'Bad fella go walkabout, bring 'em down nuts, up over. Very bad.' Later, Dr. Anderson translated this ambiguous statement for me, explaining that I had encountered what is called a coconut crab; moving en masse they have been known to leave a plantation practically bare of green nuts overnight, not to mention breaking many a man's ankle with their vicious clipper. This information rattled me a bit, for as Doc put it, there is a chance they might be heading towards Makeeta. Needless to say, I'm keeping my fingers crossed.

"Well, Mother, as time is getting on I'd better say good night. Please give earnest thought to my suggestion about coming here, if only for a holiday. I'd love to have you.

"I remain,

"Your affectionate son,

"Gort."

Mrs. Saunders was removing her glasses when Jenny Lynne, who sat fingering a handkerchief, asked:

"What's wrong with the little boy, Ma?"

"He's dying."

"Dying—what of?"

"Consumption."

"Oh, gosh, how awful!"

"It's very sad."

"Gort's letters are always interesting, aren't they, Ma?"

The older woman's sympathetic eyes swept a still attractive face that over the last ten minutes had paled perceptibly.

"Always, dear—he seems to get so much into them, doesn't he?"

"A few days before we left for New York," Jenny Lynne went on, "I was going through an old trunk in the lumber room and came across a bundle neatly tied with ribbon—hurt me so much to read them—but I did, every word."

Two of Mrs. Saunders' fingers were tapping on the envelope, tapping excitedly, for much as she liked her guest, she wished to be alone. Page three was full of wonderful surprises. How really marvellous that Gort had——

"He seems awfully keen for you to visit Makeeta, Ma."

"I might too, later on."

"Gosh, how I envy you! I'd give almost anything to see him again."

"I understand, dear."

"Of course it's very stupid of me going on like this," the other confessed with a surge of new spirit. "Undignified, too, but now I'm free again I'm in a position to fight for the love in my heart." She lifted her gaze quickly to challenge Mrs. Saunders. "A woman's right, isn't it, Ma?"

"I guess so."

"But it is." Jenny Lynne's voice sounded as agitated as her face looked. "We can all make mistakes, and I'm a far better woman for having made mine. Suffering, though hard to bear, gives us something—you must admit that, Ma."

"I do—when did your divorce go through, dear?"

"Five weeks ago last Thursday."

"Pleased?"

"Oh, yes—terribly pleased."

"You're looking better, I'm happy to say."

"Feel it, too."

"Fine! Wonder where Amber May is?"

"She'll be all right."

"Perhaps I'd better go and see, just in case."

"Don't bother—I want to talk to you, Ma."

"About Gort?"

"Who else?"

"Over a cup of coffee, honey," the other suggested, rising. "I have a pot on the simmering plate. Only be a few minutes."

Once in the kitchen, Mrs. Saunders slipped from the envelope her letter, and turning to page three, read quickly:

"Now for the big news. Probably my frequent references to Mlle Balant have made you curious as to what part this lovely young woman takes in my Vila set-up. Frankly, she dominates the whole scene. As I write two facts stand out very clearly: first, I owe my life to her; and, secondly, she is by far the most fascinating, beautiful and charming person I've ever met, unspoilt, a creature of wind, sun and rain. Angélique (pretty name, isn't it?) made me catch at my breath the first time we met.

"I'd never seen anything like her before. In Hollywood she'd become famous overnight, but take her from here and this valley to me would become just another indentation in the ground.

"I'm head over heels in love with her, Mother. Have been for weeks; yet Angélique knows nothing of my feelings. Pride is my strongest ally where she is concerned—always conscious of what that dum-dum bullet did to me, I've steered a middle course; striven hard to regard her as a rare gem which must be admired but not handled by man's crude fingers. However, I'm human enough to know that a time will come when I'll no longer be capable of carrying on this game of make-believe.

"As for Angélique, I'm quite certain she looks upon me as nothing more than a big brother, for not by word or expression have I detected anything which I could interpret as meaning that my feelings are reciprocated. At this juncture, of course, I'm unable to think beyond little guy; his end I live in dread of, but I've reason to believe that it will draw Angélique and myself closer. You see, up to now we've been a team. Together we've explored the greater part of this valley, had numerous picnics and laughed our way home through the dusk. Soon these memorable outings will be finished for little guy—the question is, what happens then? Will it write finis to my love story or prove to be merely the beginning?

"In fairness to you I should have come out into the open weeks ago, but hesitated because I believed that my crippled feet would prove far too big an obstacle for my heart. Consequently I kept referring to Angélique as plain Mlle Balant. Now, however, the truth is out. Pride has fallen by the wayside for, crippled and sterile as I am, I can't help loving Angélique any more than I can help grieving for little guy."

When Mrs. Saunders, carrying a tray of coffee and cakes, re-entered the lounge a few minutes later Jenny Lynne was

kneeling before the fire, feeding small sticks to a dozen hungry flames. "You shouldn't have gone to so much trouble, Ma," she said, glancing over her shoulder. "We've not long had breakfast."

"Now sit down, dear, and don't fuss."

Abashed, the girl dropped into a chair and watched her hostess pouring out the coffee. Ultra-sensitive of late, she had noticed a change in Mrs. Saunders' voice—was still wondering why, when the older woman held forward a plate saying:

"Try one of those cakes—they're delicious."

"No, thanks. What's wrong, Ma?"

"Wrong?"

"You look worried."

"Nonsense."

"But you do—been crying, haven't you?"

Mrs. Saunders looked her visitor straight in the eye:

"I thought you knew I never cried, dear."

"Then everything's all right?"

"Of course—how's your coffee?"

"Just fine."

Seating herself, the older woman kept her gaze averted. While reading page three of Gort's letter, she had become quite emotional, but now her new-found happiness was battling against pity for the girl who sat staring into the fire. "You poor kid," her thoughts whispered. "You poor kid!"

"I want your advice, Ma," Jenny Lynne muttered presently. "There's something I want to do badly. I thought it all out while you were in the kitchen as a matter of fact."

"Tell me, honey."

"You might not approve." The girl was sitting forward with hands folded about her knees. "But you're Gort's mother and must not judge what I'm about to say from that point of view—we represent two different generations, Ma—this world's spun round mighty fast since you were my age."

"Guess it has, dear."

"What I mean is your girlhood belonged to the schottische and covered all-over swimsuit period; mine to square-dancing and the thunder of guns. True, isn't it?"

"Quite true."

"Yet we sit here as friends, drawn together by a love for the same man—your son, who, but for Fate, would have been my husband today." The speaker expelled a trembling

breath and continued: "A lot of people would consider me indecent if they knew what was in my heart. It's saying to me right now: 'Go to Vila—make one last effort in the pursuit of happiness.'" She smiled sadly. "I'm willing to do it, Ma. Daddy will pay my fare and even if Gort doesn't want me I'll have the consolation of knowing I've done my best to make amends for the way I treated him."

Mrs. Saunders did not speak for a while. Up till a few minutes ago she had regarded her friend as a girl who had never grown up, but now she knew she was quite wide of the mark. A woman sat opposite her—a determined yet terribly pathetic woman of the world who, if not discouraged, would place Gort in a most invidious position and in all probability be insufferably humiliated at the same time.

"I think that would be most unwise, honey," she said at last. "After all, you did make your choice, and by what I've gleaned from Gort's letters he seems perfectly contented."

"You're against my making the trip, aren't you, Ma?"

"Definitely."

"But isn't there a chance of our coming together again?"

Jenny Lynne muttered, rising and stooping before the fire. "That little boy, for instance, Gort obviously is very fond of him. What's going to happen when he dies?"

"One recovers from such things, honey."

"Gort's going to miss him though, you can tell from his letter."

"Granted, yet——"

"If I lost Amber May I'm sure I'd die, Ma."

"You wouldn't, dear. Another thing, this poor lad isn't Gort's own flesh and blood."

"Grown to love him, though, hasn't he?"

"Very much."

"And if I arrive in Vila after little guy, as Gort calls him, has passed on, he'll at least appreciate my coming—that's only natural, isn't it?"

Mrs. Saunders looked across at the crouched figure and sighed. She didn't know what to do. One voice in her urged for truth, the other diplomacy; yet after some moments of thought she heeded only her heart and said softly:

"A man's appreciation is not sufficient, honey. The question is: 'Could Gort ever love you again?'"

Jenny Lynne turned slowly:

"Why not? Still young, aren't I, and in my own way am far from unattractive? What's more, I'd expect very little of

him—just kindness and the comfort of knowing he was about the place."

"What place?"

"Makeeta."

"You'd go straight to him?"

"I would."

"Stay there, honey?"

"If he wanted me to."

"But what if Gort refused to marry you?"

"I wouldn't care." The speaker's face was no longer attractive. Her lips were too firmly set, her eyes too despairing, her nostrils wide, dilated. "I'd even be prepared to give him a child. Shocked, aren't you, Ma?"

"No, honey," Mrs. Saunders whispered, "just hurt. After all, I've known you for a long time, since a little girl, in fact, and I'm hurt because you're forcing me to do something I don't want to do—hurt you."

"How, Ma?"

"Well, in the first place Gort can't have a child."

The other's gaze lifted quickly.

"Why?"

"Because of that wound in his tummy."

"Oh!" Jenny Lynne's feet seemed to slide more than lift over the dark maroon carpet. She had been at the window some while before her unsteady lips moved to speak:

"That's dreadful, Ma, dreadful; but we'd have Amber May to share, and——"

"You must not go to Vila, honey," Mrs. Saunders muttered from directly behind her guest. "Please let us leave it at that."

"I'm more determined than ever now," the other challenged, swinging round. "After I leave here I'll call in at Daddy's office and ask him to advance——"

"You're too late, dear—there's someone else."

"But you said——"

"I didn't know until I began reading that letter." Mrs. Saunders was on the verge of tears herself. "Remember when I stopped half-way through and skipped a page? It was all about a girl named Angélique."

Those determined lines on the young woman's pale face dissolved and only an expression of hopelessness showed; but her eyes were dry and she did not cry when out of compassion Gort's mother placed comforting arms about her. In fact, five minutes later as, hand in hand, they crossed the veranda, no one would have believed that Jenny Lynne's heart

was broken. She even managed to smile as Amber May came running across the lawn, carrying a snarling grey Persian cat.

"Put it down, darling," she warned. "Might give you a nasty scratch."

"Has already," the child lisped, holding out her right hand. "I was only tying a piece of string around her neck, too—didn't hurt, though."

"I'll have Betsy," Mrs. Saunders rejoined, lifting the animal from the child's arms. "Mummy's going home now, honey."

Amber May laughed.

"I like being here, Nanna—have such fun."

"I'm sure you do."

"Mummy?"

"Yes, darling."

"Can we come again tomorrow?"

"I don't think so," Jenny Lynne answered on her way to the gate. "Auntie Rhie wants us to go and live with her—we're leaving for New York tonight."

"Oh, Mummy, I——"

"Quiet, darling, quiet."

Mrs. Saunders reached the gate first, pushed it open:

"You're really leaving here, honey?"

"Oh, yes. I've nothing in common with Two Springs any more—hate the place, in fact."

"Then when shall I see you again?"

"I don't know."

"But you'll write to me occasionally?"

"Now and then."

"I'm sorry about everything, dear, terribly sorry."

"It's not your fault. Good-bye, Ma."

"Good-bye, honey."

"Mrs. Saunders did not watch her visitors cross the road. Anyway, had she tried, tears would have blotted out their retreating figures.

CHAPTER XXI

SINCE taking the taxi, Dr. Balant had not spoken a word to his driver and already they were well into the valley, making heavy going along a road which last night's downpour had reduced to mud.

The morning, however, was delightful. Long shafts of sunlight showed between the fronds of gently swaying palms, stabbed at the jungle's glistening carpet with a thousand golden arms. In as many places heat had extracted thin eddies of moisture from the earth's rain-drenched surface. These now drifted heavenward, appeared as permanent marble columns built to support nature's dripping roof. The sky, a deep blue, could be glimpsed only occasionally, for here in this paradise of palm and interlocked jungle the outside world seemed something apart.

Even Paul La Folette, an unimaginative fellow whose huge head sat on his fat shoulders like a shapeless pumpkin, responded to the glory of the morning. Every few minutes he burst into song or filled his lungs with great mouthfuls of sweetly perfumed air. Half a dozen times he'd endeavoured to strike up a conversation, but after the last rebuff, had muttered: "Ça me rase," and given up the ghost.

During most of the journey Dr. Balant had sat huddled in the back seat, gazing down at his unsteady hands which, like their owner's face, were damp with nervous sweat. Sick with torment, he was trying to prepare himself for a great crisis, but as yet had been unable to decide on any form of procedure. This he was trying to do now as the taxi, pushing its way through churning mud, neared Makeeta.

Gort was making towards the largest of three copra sheds when he noticed the car draw to a halt. "Angélique and little guy," he muttered aloud, only to frown a moment later when a tall white figure stepped from the taxi.

"Good morning," he called. "Anything I can do for you?"

Without replying, Dr. Balant walked quickly in Gort's direction. Now the hour was at hand he felt a little more composed. On nearing the crippled man, his new-born spirit received a further lift when the young planter smiled. Dr.

Balant liked that smile; it was so reassuring in circumstances such as these, he thought, to find oneself at the mercy of a man who, at least, looked a gentleman.

"I don't think I've had the pleasure of meeting you, sir," Gort said as his visitor halted within a few yards of him. "My name's Saunders."

"And I'm Angélique's father, M'sieur. Ah, yes, I see you recognize me now."

"Only the voice," the other said, shuffling forward with his right hand outstretched. "It was quite dark and——"

"I was very drunk," Dr. Balant interrupted, submitting cold fingers to his companion's steel-like grip. "Angélique, poor child, was very cross with me for arriving home in such a condition."

"I've done the same thing myself a few times, sir," Gort confessed behind a quiet laugh. "A few drinks now and then doesn't do anyone any harm. Have you had breakfast?"

"Over an hour ago."

"Then come into the house and I'll have Jimmy knock you up some coffee."

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not," the other muttered, lighting a cheroot, "but perhaps you could suggest a place where we can talk without being overheard?"

Something in Dr. Balant's voice forced the smile from his host's lips. Several times lately Angélique had expressed concern about her father; his drinking bouts and moods of acute depression were, as she put it, "quite inconsistent with Poppa's nature." But he had not given the matter much thought. Now, however, as he stood looking across at that handsome face, a sense of uneasiness swept through him. It had grown almost to alarm when he said:

"There's a bench over there, sir."

"That will do nicely, M'sieur."

When both were seated the older man removed his topee and for some seconds stared into space. He was still doing so when Gort asked:

"What's wrong, Doctor?"

The medico leaned forward with elbows balanced on knees, then glanced sideways:

"I would take you for a man of honour, M'sieur—are you?"

"If you're asking 'can I be trusted?' you've nothing to worry about."

"Please do not be offended," the Frenchman urged, "for as this conversation goes on you will understand that I'm at a

great disadvantage. In short, I'm here to plead for your co-operation, not demand it."

"Meaning just what, sir?"

"Quite obvious, isn't it, M'sieur? I have a daughter and you are the young man of late she's been visiting regularly. Does it not follow that I've come to discuss Angélique?"

"On what grounds?"

"A very delicate one, M'sieur."

"I still don't get it."

The other sighed and with his moist palms now pressed together, fixed his gaze straight ahead:

"Would you be good enough to answer a few questions before I plunge any deeper, M'sieur?"

"Of course."

"Also give me your word as a gentleman that Angélique will never be told of my visit?"

"I've an idea you're barking up the wrong tree," Gort said, running the end of his walking-stick across the moist loam. "In the first place, I can't see any reason for all this secrecy. Sure, Angélique visits here, but if you're suggesting there's been anything between us to warrant getting concerned about, you're right off the beam."

"M'sieur?"

"Well."

"You're getting angry."

"More puzzled than angry, sir, yet——"

"You consider me impertinent for calling, isn't that so?"

"Not really." The younger man's voice had returned to normal. "After all, I'm a stranger to you and shouldn't object to being quizzed—that's why you called, isn't it?"

"Would to God it were the only reason, M'sieur."

"Oh!" Gort's startled eyes swept his companion's averted face quickly and for the second time in minutes he experienced a cold wave of apprehension stirring inside him. Dr. Balant looked like a man standing transfixed on a roadway with a lorry hurtling towards him. Fascinated, he watched the physician's pale lips move.

"In the life of all mortals there are blind spots, M'sieur, a moment where sane reasoning gives way to passion, debauchery, or folly of another kind. Most of us survive this lapse and the few who don't usually possess a faculty to shut it out as something unworthy of reflection." The speaker paused, flicked a speck of ash from the lapel of his coat, and resumed: "I, unfortunately, represent a tragic minority who,

as the years slide past, are drawn closer towards life's dark abyss. Behind me shame's naked sword glitters threateningly and ahead I see nothing but shadows. There, in a few words, is my dilemma, M'sieur. I can't retreat or go forward without torment, nor will my pride allow me to explain why. However, your promise to keep this visit a matter of the strictest confidence would help me immeasurably."

Before Dr. Balant was half-way through the sentence it suddenly occurred to Gort that his companion was suffering from some kind of mental disorder. This query had become almost a conviction as he sat there now pondering over the words, "life's dark abyss," "shame's naked sword glistening threateningly," "can't retreat or go back without torment." Yes, there was the answer. The doctor had been drinking a lot lately, had reached a state where he imagined all manner of horrible things. Hallucinations, they called it. He seemed harmless enough, though. Sat there quiet as a mouse. Sure, sure, he'd coast along easily with the poor old chap—try and humour him.

"Whatever you say will be off the record as far as I'm concerned, sir."

The physician muttered a grateful "Thank you," then began tracing an imaginary pattern on the top of his topee. "We French are very foolish sometimes, M'sieur. My daughter, for instance—it was unwise of her to call at your room that night without having first met you. I do not favour such acts, no matter how praiseworthy. Yet Angélique, she cannot help doing such things. Impetuous, strong-willed—she goes on singing her way through life and at heart is only a child. Already you have sensed it, eh, M'sieur?"

"Her simplicity—yes, yes, I have."

"You know also that she is very fond of little Butch."

"We both are."

"It is a sad case. You have no doubt heard what is wrong with him?"

"I was told some weeks ago."

"But Angélique, she still does not suspect anything."

"Perhaps it is best that way."

"Probably."

A silence fell between the two men. Gort sat blowing smoke-rings into the brilliant sunlight; his companion one minute shifting about nervously on the bench, the next fiddling with his hat.

"Since coming to Vila you have made a good impression

on a lot of people, M'sieur," Dr. Balant said presently. "At the club I often hear your name passed around—it is even rumoured that Sister Almond has fallen in love with you."

"Damn rot!" Gort's eyes were touched with anger. "She's a very nice person, but as for being in love with me, that's too silly for words."

"I fail to see why, M'sieur. After all——"

"You had some questions to ask me?"

Dr. Balant allowed the cheroot to fall from his fingers, then sat motionless, watching a thin spiral of smoke rising from its smouldering heart. Suddenly he looked around.

"I'm going to ask you to do something for Angélique's sake, yours and my own, M'sieur."

"And that is?"

"Stop seeing my daughter."

"Good God!"

"I know I'm asking a lot of you," the other went on quickly, "but, believe me, selfishness has nothing to do with my request. We are two men, M'sieur, brought together by a chain of tragic circumstances: Korea and the Ellice Islands are in this instance closely associated. To you one spelt permanent injury, for me years of stumbling through fear to reach fear. That's what I've done these past two decades. There's no escape or forgetfulness, nothing on which I can lean, because the dark abyss is my conscience and, like the turbulent waters of a bombora, is never still."

Gort forced a smile from his lips. He was really sorry for the doctor, yet why on a beautiful morning like this should anyone sit there talking such a lot of nonsense? Dreadful thing, hallucination, gave its victim no peace. Look at the poor old guy now, eyes popping out of his head, fingernails digging at both knees, mouth sweat-rimmed—probably he was wandering about in that dark abyss again. Sounded a dreadful place, "stumbling through fear to reach fear," eh? What a damned pity that a man of his ability should be persecuted by such thoughts! If the truth was known he'd led an exemplary life; yet it wasn't much good arguing against anyone in his state; far kinder to let him leave Makeeta believing something had been achieved, even if it did mean telling a few barefaced lies.

"Before we go any further," Gort said, turning to his companion and speaking with assumed seriousness, "I'd like to make a few points clear. In the first place, I'm not the

romantic type, far from it, but I do enjoy Angélique's company. What's more, I'm egotistical enough to believe she's not bored with mine. As for anything coming out of our friendship, that's most improbable. To her I'm just an agreeable, easy-going sort of guy—nothing more or less."

"If I shared your views do you think I'd be here?" Dr. Balant challenged, running a hand through his thinning white hair. "I know Angélique far better than anyone, and my observations have given me to understand that for the first time in her life she's interested in a man—you, M'sieur."

Gort's heart warmed at the statement, yet he came back with a nonchalant:

"Again I say you are worrying yourself unnecessarily, sir——"

"Please do not treat my words lightly, M'sieur," the other interrupted quickly. "I am many years your senior and a fool. Oh, yes, I drink too much; can be seen staggering along Rue Higginson most every night, yet my senses are still keen enough to warn me of this dangerous association."

"Dangerous association?" Gort's good humour was deserting him. "Let's assume everything you say is correct, I still fail to appreciate those two words. There's nothing in my past I'm ashamed of, so if you've got anything against me say it now and get it over with."

"That I cannot do," the other muttered, rising. "Up till now I've been very frank—gone as far as I dare. The rest is up to you. In your hands rests the happiness of three people—remember that, M'sieur."

"Do you know what I think; Doctor?"

"Well?"

"You've got everything mixed up. Angélique doesn't care two hoots about me; it's little guy she——"

"Then you will continue to see my daughter, M'sieur?"

"Don't expect me to turn her away, do you?"

"When so much is at stake one should be forgiven in hoping for the impossible, my friend."

Shaking his head in puzzled fashion, Gort rose. Up till a few minutes ago he had judged Dr. Balant as a man suffering from a terrible mental affliction, but now he had other ideas. The poor devil was insane, there could be no doubt about it.

"I beg of you to ponder over what I've said, M'sieur. Angélique is a very sensitive young woman and at this juncture must not be destroyed by the dark nemesis which lurks in the background. She's a proud child, so proud that a feigned

indifference on your part would have the desired effect. It is so little to ask in the circumstances."

"You're wasting your breath, Doctor." Gort's voice had given way to intolerance. "I'm far too fond of Angélique either to hurt her or to join hands with you in depriving her of a friendship which we both value."

The physician took up his topee, stood gazing down at its dust-coated rim for fully a minute. When he spoke emotion hung on every word:

"You leave me with but a single hope, M'sieur."

"What, Doctor?"

"That over the next few weeks something will happen to save my daughter from being condemned to walk with me through the dark abyss. Unfortunately, she loves you; told me so last night when I scolded her for arriving home so late. But with Angélique I was more guarded—merely voiced my disapproval at her spending so much time at Makeeta. To you, however, I've been very direct, have I not, M'sieur?"

Muttering under his breath, Gort took three shuffling steps, halted and glared back towards the tall pale-faced man who stood watching him:

"I still have no clue as to what you're driving at, Doctor," he said. "All this talk about 'threatening swords,' 'groping through darkness,' etc., is right over my head—well over it—so in simple language, what are you trying to tell me?"

"That you'll never marry my daughter."

"If I get the chance you'll not stop me."

"M'sieur?"

"Yes?"

"Are you in love with Angélique?"

"I am."

"Then I advise you to leave Vila by the next boat."

"Why should I?"

"Because within an hour of your proposing to my daughter, I'll be forced to break her heart—mine, too. Good-bye, M'sieur."

The taxi had long passed from view before Gort stirred. He didn't know why that old lunatic should upset him so much, but he had. Suddenly all warmth seemed gone from the sun, and chilled fingers were gripping at his every joint.

"Don't be a sap," he kept telling himself on the way to the house. "Dr. Balant's nuts—doesn't know what he's saying. What you want is a good stiff whisky. That'll buck you up."

Less than an hour earlier the sun had slid behind those palm-covered mountains to the west, but already night was established, had filled the valley with darkness and that awesome silence only experienced where man has intruded upon the solitude of nature.

Since taking up residence at Makeeta it had become a habit with Gort to walk to a place about three hundred yards from the homestead. There the valley fell away in undulating waves of wild grandeur until reaching the base of a mountain some two miles distant. Here he had often stood watching daylight give way to dusk, but this evening for the first time in weeks he'd not ventured beyond the veranda.

Some time before he'd succeeded in shaking off his depression, yet somehow nothing seemed quite the same. Whether this was due to numerous whiskies consumed during the day or to his inability to completely ignore Dr. Balant's warning, Gort couldn't decide. "You know the poor old guy's a screw loose, so why sit here worrying?" he'd told himself at least twenty times since coming on to the veranda. But try as he might his thoughts kept returning to the dramatic interview, until finally, in an endeavour to snap out of it, he had risen and moved down the steps.

A full moon of great brilliance was pouring its golden illumination into the valley before he halted and gazed about him. Everything within range of his eyes was clearly revealed—the road leading to Vila, fringed on both sides by palms, the matted jungle beyond, stabbing the night with a hundred different colours, and down there Makeeta looking for all the world like a small white shell set on a carpet of green moss. His heart responded to the scene, became lighter as he took in the mute beauty of valley and moon-drenched mountains. Five minutes later, however, as he started homeward, the sound of galloping hooves made him turn about.

Horse and rider were almost upon him when Sister Almond dragged hard on the reins.

"Oh, gosh!" she whispered, drawing abreast of him. "You scared the daylights out of me, Mr. Saunders—don't ever do that again."

He smiled and ran a hand along the mare's sweating neck.

"Do what?"

"Step from under those palms—I might have run you down."

"Hardly likely."

"It could happen," she said, sliding from the saddle. "For

a terrible moment I thought you were a native—was I scared!"

"Then I'm sorry."

"Should be, too."

"Where were you making for?"

"Your place, of course—pleased?"

"Sure."

She laughed, and while attending to her hair kept glancing at him. In the moonlight he looked taller and more distinguished than ever. Of course, she was a little fool, running after him like this, but having waited in vain for little Butch to call at the hospital with an invitation for her to visit Makëeta, she'd lost patience and——

"Your riding habit suits you, Sister."

"Thanks—my hair, will it pass?"

"O.K. by me."

"Fine—why out walking at this time of night, Mr. Saunders?"

"Something to do, I guess."

"That's your place down there, isn't it?"

"Hm, hm."

"What a lovely spot! You must be so thrilled."

"I am. Pity you couldn't have seen it by daylight, though. This valley has really got something."

"It's very beautiful," she admitted, draping the reins about her shoulder and moving off with him, "but don't you find living here a little lonesome?"

"I did tonight for the first time."

"Hence my coming across you so far from home, eh?"

"It's not very far," he said quietly. "There's a short cut about fifty yards further along. We discovered it the first week I took over."

She was looking skywards to where the moon sat like a huge golden ball on a vast expanse of pale-blue velvet.

"By 'we' you mean Angélique Balant and little Butch, I gather?"

"As a matter of fact Angélique knew of it," he explained, "but didn't happen to be about that day."

"Visits here quite often, doesn't she?"

"That's right."

"Better watch your step, Mr. Saunders."

"Why?"

"Well, a beautiful young Frenchwoman calls on a lonely

yet eligible American—"All this and Heaven too," as Field would say—follow me?"

Gort smiled and, pointing to a path on his right, turned off the road:

"I get what you're aiming at, Sister, but you're wrong, quite wrong."

"So up to now your friendship's been strictly platonic?"

"Definitely."

"You surprise me."

He made no attempt to pursue the conversation and Sister Almond, a little ashamed of having allowed herself to become personal, sighed in self-reproach. They walked slowly along the jungle track where moonbeams and shadows lay side by side. Once he halted to gather a gorgeous cream orchid whose heart was spotted with crimson, yet in handing her the exquisite bloom, said casually:

"Pretty, huh?"

His companion, however, proved even less demonstrative, for beyond a hardly audible "Oh, gosh!" she gave no indication of what the gesture meant to her. Less than fifty yards separated them from the house when Gort asked:

"Kind of cute, isn't it?"

"A dream, Mr. Saunders," she whispered, withdrawing moist lips from the orchid's soft petals. "I shouldn't be the least surprised if we encounter a fairy any minute."

He threw her a quick glance.

"What's wrong, Sister?"

"Nothing—why?"

"I could have sworn you'd been crying."

"No—I'm just a little overcome, that's all."

"Not upset or anything?"

"I did feel like bawling back there."

"When?"

"While walking along that track—your picking this orchid for me, the moonbeams, shadows and the spiritual hush of it all."

"I get like that at times," he confessed, taking three quick steps to catch up with her. "Almost every day before sun-down finds me at a spot over there. I watch Old Sol slide behind those mountains and start thinking to myself: 'Wonder what I'll be doing twenty years from now,' but when the dusk starts creeping through the valley I know I'll still be here."

"You sound like a very contented man, Mr. Saunders."

"Should be, too."

When they gained the house she buckled the reins round the steps handrail, then made as if to assist him, but he smiled and waved her aside, saying:

"I can manage these easily—after you."

The lounge-room was exactly as she had imagined it would be, small, comfortable and scrupulously clean. Flowers filled every vase; and six cane lounge-chairs, their cushions showing signs of wear, were arranged with good taste. White rugs covered most of the polished floor, and in the right-hand corner a radio, its dial aglow, gave out a mixture of music and static.

Sister Almond heard him enter, but did not stir from her place by the window. When, however, he bent over a pressure lamp and began pumping it furiously, she voiced a protest:

"Must you?"

Gort looked up:

"Must I what?"

"Well, that lamp—bright enough already, isn't it?"

"Suits me," he said, straightening. "Care for a spot, Sister?"

"No, thanks. I just want to stand here."

"The view's good, isn't it?"

"Indescribably beautiful."

"Sure is mighty nice."

"But those palms washed by moonlight. Do come and look at them, Mr. Saunders."

"Mind if I get a drink first?"

"No, go right ahead."

When Gort re-entered the room her girlish figure still graced the window.

"In case you changed your mind I poured one for you, too," he said, holding forward a glass. "Added equal part water."

"Then you'll have to drink it yourself," she returned quite firmly. "I'm never going to touch that stuff again."

"Mid-year resolution, eh?"

"One of them."

"Then there are others?"

"Another, anyway." Her eyes moved his way. "Want to know what it is?"

"If you feel like telling me."

"I've decided not to come here again."

Taking her statement lightly, he grinned, and after finishing off the contents of one glass asked:

"You're not serious?"

"Oh, yes, I am."

"But——"

"You and Makeeta are not good for me," she said with a frankness that made him wince, "so from now on I'll keep in my own backyard."

Gort's face took on a bleak expression, not because of what she had said or the fact of her words conveying a meaning to him. The uneasiness stirring within him came from another source—Dr. Balant. This morning, long before Angélique's father departed, he'd written off his visitor as being simple, but Sister Almond's statement had raised a doubt in his mind, for it confirmed one of the very things that had bolstered up his belief in the older man's confused mental state, therefore——

"You needn't look so worried, Mr. Saunders—I'll not poison myself or take a header into the harbour. I'm very practical really."

His eyes warmed under her honest gaze:

"You're the kind of woman," he was thinking, "who'd be a tower of strength to any man, but I'm not the guy. I'm sure she realizes it too."

Her quiet laughter interrupted his thoughts for the second time in as many minutes:

"Well, aren't you going to say anything?"

"Sister?"

"Yes?"

"Quit this Mister stuff, will you—the name's Gort."

"And mine's Valerie—Val for short."

"Swell—now what say we sit?"

"Sure you wouldn't like me to go?"

"For heck's sake brush that chip off your shoulder, will you?" he remonstrated, pointing to a chair. "There's no need to get tough with me."

She smiled, took one last look at the moon-bathed valley, then moved away from the window. After she was seated Gort followed suit, sat staring across at her:

"Queer, isn't it," he said suddenly. "Just before old Sam died you advised me to get out of Vila—now the boot's on the other foot—I'm telling you."

"What—leave the hospital?"

"Yes."

"But I signed on for three years."

"Nothing to stop you breaking the contract, is there?"

"Only a sense of duty," Sister Almond reminded, leaning

back against a cushion. "After all, a nurse doesn't regard her job in the same way as does a salesgirl or a stenographer. It becomes part of her life—that's why I can't quit."

"So you intend sticking Vila out, eh?"

"For another one year, two months and nineteen days."

"Then what?"

"I'll take a nice long rest—might even go to——"

Her words were lost under the deep rumbling of an earth tremor. Gripping the chair's arm-rest she waited for it to pass, but when after about ten seconds the room still shook violently and every piece of furniture began bobbing up and down, she spoke:

"This is the worst I've ever experienced—frightening, isn't it?"

He rose and, moving over to the radio, switched it off.

"Scared, Val?"

"I am a bit."

"Same here."

"But it can't last much longer."

"That mare of yours has the wind up, too. Listen to her."

"Poor thing—hope she doesn't break away."

"I'll go and see if I can quieten her down," but even as he moved past Sister Almond's chair the rumbling died, was followed by an ominous quiet.

"That's the fourth we've had this week," she said, joining him at the door. "Getting far too consistent, aren't they?"

He nodded and walked with her along the veranda. A few seconds ago the palms had been waving frantically; now, however, their fronds were motionless. Nothing stirred out there in the garden, even the roan mare stood perfectly still.

"This part of the world sure is a puzzle," he muttered at last. "You never know what's going to happen next—rain, hurricanes, earth tremors and heat all have their turn."

"Give me good old Sydney any time—much safer, isn't it?"

"What about 1942, Val?—things were a bit sticky those days, eh?"

"You mean before the Coral Sea battle?"

"That's right."

She made a little grimace:

"This is where you start bragging, I suppose, Gort."

"No." He grinned. "Uncle Sam did help a bit though, didn't he?"

"Quite a bit."

"And when the next real show begins we'll be together again, boots and all, eh?"

"You bet!"

"Want to know something, Val?"

"What?"

"I reckon you're a pretty swell person."

"Thanks."

"Another thing, I haven't finished my drink—so you can't go yet."

"Oh, yes, I can—right away, too."

"Still determined not to visit Makeeta again?"

"More adamant than ever."

"Then I'll have to call and see you at the hospital."

"When?"

"Next time I'm in town."

"Is that a promise?"

"Cross my heart."

She laughed, and after mounting turned his way:

"I've a better suggestion, Gort."

"I'm listening."

"Get bitten by a nice big Anopheles mosquito and we'll have you with us for at least a week. 'Bye now."

"Good night, Val."

CHAPTER XXII

FOR almost an hour they had reclined on the bank, gazing up at a clear blue sky in which only one solitary cloud floated. Tired after their long walk and the sumptuous salad lunch Angélique had provided, both were content to lie on the long grass and submit their bodies to Old Sol's warm caresses.

It had been a memorable day for Gort. During the morning, urged on and assisted by his two companions, he had thrown discretion to the wind. Several times he had hesitated when confronted by narrow mountain ledges which seemed must test even the skill of an expert, but on reaching these frightening hazards Angélique had gripped the crippled man's hand and made him too ashamed to baulk.

As for little Butch, he had never been so gay. "Ah, M'sieur," he'd said while the three of them were making ready to leave Makeeta, "I feel very happy this morning. Many times I've told you about our swimming hole and now we are going there. So it is I sing."

Long before they had reached the mountain top the child's mood had been transmitted to both man and girl; it was so good to hear him laughing, to see his eyes, particularly bright this morning, now glancing skywards, now dancing in the spirit of song. During their perilous descent Gort had questioned the advisability of little Butch's running ahead of them, but today that frail under-nourished body seemed a thing of steel, and not once during the past six hours had he been distressed by coughing.

Lying there now listening to the rippling melody of a great waterfall, Gort was re-living that never-to-be-forgotten first glance of what Angélique had so aptly described as a little corner of creation. To Gort this lovely spot would be for ever green in his memory. He had visited most of the much-publicized resorts in America, had been awed by some of the grandeur seen, but not until near ten o'clock had his senses reeled before nature's beauty.

Idyllic, unspoiled, heavenly, it stretched before his amazed eyes. Ahead a waterfall dropped from the mountain's mouth,

fell in twirling, gushing torrents, weaving silver patterns into the precipice's glistening countenance. Hundreds of feet below huge boulders reduced the volume to a fine lace-like spray, which in turn leapt upwards and out, forming a wondrous curtain of gold, silver and blue. From there a singing stream was born, crystal-clear, its leaping, laughing waters slid in great haste between banks of fern and flower that ran in gentle tiers until they too became just another part of an ever-jealous jungle.

Watched by excited eyes, Gort had stood for some minutes gazing about him, yet all the time he was made conscious of his companion's deep affection for him and the lush young grass playing about his sweating ankles. He hated pressing it underfoot, it smelt so clean and sweet, but what else could he do when this bright green carpet of nature covered every inch of the ground?

Stirred by the occasion, he had shuffled from place to place, followed by the girl he loved and a little friend he was about to lose. Something told him that never again would the three of them be privileged to visit this spot together—that there could never be a next time—and moved by a power much mightier than his will, tears had filled the man's eyes, as standing there gazing across this holy place he felt the presence of God, gladness and death.

Little Butch's thin voice had interrupted Gort's thoughts.

"Now, M'sieur," he had said, "we are going to swim. Angélique bought you these, so you've no excuse."

The man had protested, advanced a dozen reasons why he could not don those pale-blue trunks, but they had given him no quarter until finally his pride wilted under the warmth and laughter of their incessant appeals.

Thus the morning passed; they had dived for white pebbles thrown into clear blue water, climbed over rocks with the gusto of children, eaten like lords, and now with little Butch snoring on the stream's bank, Gort lay stretched out on his tummy, arms tucked under chin, gazing towards where a few feet away Angélique reclined in much the same posture.

Presently he asked:

"Asleep?"

She did not lift her head.

"No—just thinking."

"What about, honey?"

"Poppa."

"How's he been lately!"

"Very strange. I do not understand him any more."

"Still visits the club, eh?"

"Too much—this morning he didn't arrive home till four o'clock—I'm so worried about him, Gort."

Thinking deeply, he drew himself up on both elbows and, after lighting a cigarette, lay there for some while staring across at that lovely head pillowed on two brown arms. The man's voice was as tender as his eyes when he spoke:

"Have you any idea what's worrying your father, Angélique?"

"That's our trouble," she whispered, without turning her face his way. "Once we were so close together, and when he is moody I only have to smile and everything is all right. But now all the time Poppa is distressed, gets angry whenever I question him."

"Then why do it?"

"Because I know there's something on his mind and want to help him."

He reached out, but with his hand only an inch from hers withdrew it quickly:

"I say, honey?"

"Hm, hm."

"That something might be us, you know."

She glanced at him, her eyes wide open with surprise:

"Poppa—he has not called to see you?"

"No," he lied, "but I've a pretty fair idea that he objects to your seeing me—have for some weeks—true, isn't it?"

Her gaze dropped from under his, sought the solace of leaping waters:

"True, but quite unjustifiably," she muttered presently. "I love the days we spend together and am no longer a little child who can be ordered about. Poppa, he forgets these things—that's what I told him the other night."

"When he taxed you about coming to Makeeta?"

"Yes—we had a scene."

"When was this, honey?"

"On Tuesday night." She had dragged a handful of grass from the earth, was watching its slender blades slipping through her widely extended fingers. "Poppa says to me: 'This spending half your time with M'sieur Saunders must stop, Angélique.' Then I get very cross with him for being so silly—tell him you are an honourable man and do only good things."

The latter part of her statement meant much more to Gort than a compliment, sent a warm glow surging right through him. Part of it was already flushing his cheeks when he spoke:

"Sure is good to hear you say that, Angélique."

Their gaze met for an instant, then hers was roving all over the valley:

"Have you not thought it strange that I've never mentioned my mother, Gort?"

"You did once," he corrected, pressing his half-smoked cigarette into the ground. "We were standing at my lookout, watching the dusk, when I inquired about your mother. You told me she was dead—remember?"

"Yes—yes, I do now. It was only a few days after you moved to Makeeta, and little Butch he did not come with us that day."

"Correct."

Sighing, she picked up his discarded cigarette and, while watching a solitary pin-head of glowing tobacco fighting to create further life, said wistfully:

"Even when I was very small Poppa would get angry when I asked questions about my mother. Those days he was so kind; but when, child-like, I mention her, his face would darken with hurt—it still does, Gort."

"I wonder why, honey?"

"Because for some reason he hates her."

"Good lord!"

"Many times I have pleaded with him to tell me the story of that broken romance. The other night I thought he would, yet, as before, his lips were silenced by something hidden in the past—perhaps it shall always be so."

He frowned and began stripping a blade of grass into tiny shreds:

"I can appreciate both sides there, Angélique. Yours for wanting to know, his for hiding what doubtless is a most unhappy memory. As a stab in the dark, my guess is Madame Balant left your father soon after you were born. Seems the only answer, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps you are right," she agreed, after a long yet not embarrassing silence. "Mother, she takes no place in my thoughts, nor do the Ellice Islands. Apparently we left Niutoo when I was only a baby."

"How long was your father there, Angélique?"

"Some years, I believe."

"And did his wife accompany him from France?"

"No, she left Paris later. Beyond that I know very little."

"Which after all is sufficient to get a rough picture of what happened," he reassured gently. "Twenty years ago life anywhere in those parts would have been primitive, to say the least, and your mother being a woman accustomed to the bright life of Paris was unable to settle down. What really happened after that, of course, only your father knows, but everything adds up to his being left alone with you to look after." He gave a little grin. "Made a mighty good job of it, too, if you ask me."

"Those pieces I, too, have put together," she said very quietly, "but it is not enough. How, I ask, could any woman who loved a man leave his child? And again, why, if my mother is dead, should Poppa still hate her? No—no, there is something else, a dark cave before which the past stands guard and will not let me enter." Her gaze returned to Gort's. "Once I did not worry over these things, but when Poppa forbade me to visit Makeeta again, nasty thoughts come into my head and I am unable to sleep."

"What do you mean by 'nasty thoughts,' honey?"

"Because I do not intend to obey Poppa—isn't that very wrong?"

"Even if it was, I wouldn't admit it," he said, allowing the tips of his fingers to make contact with hers. "The best part of your father's life is over, ours has just started, and for my part I'd be willing to sacrifice almost anything if it meant keeping our friendship intact."

Angélique really smiled for the first time in over an hour and, rising, stood looking down upon him, then suddenly she threw up her arms in a wild gesture of abandon:

"After that I do not worry any more," she said behind gay laughter. "It is good—very good. And now, Gort, we swim again—yes, we swim again."

Her lovely body was gliding round the pool's sandy bottom when he reached the bank, but immediately his reflection showed she beckoned him to follow. Taking a deep breath he slid into the cool blue depths, had almost reached her when a tremor of great violence hit the Valley of Sounds. In a second everything was shaking. Small rocks dislodged from their bases toppled into the water, cracks oozing red mud split the pool's side from top to bottom, created a roar which at twenty feet down struck the swimmers' ear-drums like an almost deafening explosion.

On surfacing both man and girl were in a state of collapse, but assisted by a now very much awake little Butch they scrambled up the pool's heaving side and lay taking in quick gulps of air.

He recovered first and rising on knees bent over Angélique, was about to turn her over when she struggled into a sitting position.

"Are you all right, Gort?"

"Still a bit groggy," he said, slapping both ears to rid them of their humming. "I thought for a second the whole valley was going to collapse. How about you, honey?"

"Dizzy—my poor head, it goes round and round."

"I got such a fright," little Butch put in, throwing aside the coil of rope he held. "Never before have I seen everything shake so—that big rock up there, it almost came down on us."

"You did a grand job, feller," Gort said, sinking down by Angélique's side. "For a moment, I feared the worst."

"Together we find much excitement, M'sieur. Last month the hurricane, she hit us; and today, this. Next time perhaps Vila go up with a bang." So saying, little Butch made off down the bank. His small figure was almost out of sight when Angélique called:

"Where are you going, darling?"

The boy's happy voice just reached them:

"To gather orchids for you and M'sieur."

They watched him hopping from rock to rock, finally to disappear behind the waterfall's glistening veil.

Gort spoke:

"What a joy to see him so happy, Angélique—really loves this place, doesn't he?"

She sighed and curled both arms around her knees.

"I'm sure he is a very sick boy, though—his colour, I do not like it."

He nodded gravely, but did not voice an opinion, and the girl went on:

"Lately I have a queer feeling about our little friend. Even this morning, as we set out from Makeeta a voice whispered some frightening things—things which make me very sad."

The man's glance swept sideways:

"For instance?"

"I tell you some other time," she parried, leaning back against the bank's steep side. "Today was designed for

laughter, and already I have talked in sombre tones—you like it here, yes?"

"Couldn't imagine anything more beautiful, honey."

"Gort?"

"Yes."

"Your mother, how is she?"

"Very well."

"And you think perhaps she might come to Vila one day?"

"It's quite possible, but unfortunately mother's a real stay-at-home type and will be pretty hard to shift."

"Two Springs—what is it like?"

"I thought it was the finest place in the world once, but after the last war I kinda got set against it."

"Why?"

He smiled, and stretching out picked up his walking-stick:

"Do you really want to know?"

"Is it anything I shouldn't hear?"

"Good heavens, no! You see, as a kid I fell in love with a girl at school and by 1941 began thinking in terms of marriage." He laughed. "The day following Pearl Harbour I enlisted—still in love with her, mind you, but shortly before my division landed on Iwo Jima I received a letter from mother explaining how Jenny had eloped with a guy named Dempsey."

"Oh!" His confession had brought the girl into a sitting position. "That must have hurt you very much."

"It did—for a while."

"And you've not seen her since?"

"As a matter of fact we bumped into each other on the day I decided to leave America."

"Is that why you came to Vila?"

"Meeting her had nothing to do with it."

She sighed as if relieved, then asked:

"Jenny was very pretty, I suppose?"

"The day we met she was talking about divorcing Dempsey—looked terrible."

"You mean unhappy?"

"Very."

"Were you not sorry for her?"

He loosened a small stone with his heel and watched it rolling down the bank:

"Those days I was too mixed up to feel sorry for anyone—least of all Jenny Lynne."

"Like Poppa, you were bitter, eh?"

"Sure was."

"But now you are not like that?"

"Far from it. I've become all sentimental again."

"About Jenny?"

"Good Lord, no!" He was pushing at another stone which would not budge. "If circumstances were different I could say a lot of things, but because of what happened in Korea my feelings must remain without a voice. One day, perhaps, they might get out of hand. When and if that happens I hope you'll not be around, Angélique."

The true significance of his words were lost to her, for she interpreted them as referring first to his disability and, secondly, to herself, but vague as was the inference, it was sufficient to dampen the girl's eyes as with a soft "I'll get dressed now," she rose and, gathering up her clothes, ran with the speed of a young doe towards the jungle.

Handicapped, it took Gort a long time to dress, but when near four o'clock he stepped from behind a clump of palms she was waiting not twenty yards away. On seeing her he stopped short, then said in an embarrassed sort of way:

"Darned if I could get one of my shoes on—foot must have swollen."

She smiled and moved towards him.

"Hence those bad words I hear while standing here, eh?"

"Have you been waiting long?"

"About twenty minutes."

"Angélique?"

"Yes?"

"You've been crying?"

"A little."

His free hand claimed one of hers:

"Upset you, haven't I?"

"No—made me very happy."

Reason demanded he release those cool fingers curled about his own; but, crippled, sterile and unworthy of her as he knew himself to be, Gort was unable to muster his crumbling pride in time to resist her offered lips. Minutes passed before he forced the trembling girl from him. A hot flush swam unmolested on her cheeks, was spreading out like the tips of a parrot's wing, yet the joy in her eyes remained serene as she stood there looking up at him with a tenderness that hurt.

"We've come a long way since the night old Sam died," he said very quietly. "I went back to my room determined to

quit Vila pronto, but on finding you there everything kinda changed. I've been living in a fool's paradise ever since—know why, honey?"

"Ah—it does not matter," she said, pressing her moist lips against the back of his hand. "I'm not interested in those silly little thoughts riding through your conscience, darling. You speak of Korea—what it did to you, but only for that Communist bullet we might not have met each other—true, isn't it?"

"Horribly true, honey, because——"

"Please do not say it," she begged. "I love you for what you are, not as the Captain Saunders who landed in Korea. Your wounds, they are part of the man I gave my heart to unreservedly, proudly and for ever. Oh, darling, if only you knew how happy I am—if only you knew!"

Had Gort been less affected he would have unburdened his mind then and there, told her what is without doubt one of the most difficult of all confessions for a man to make, but affected he was, and before his emotion subsided, little Butch's untimely reappearance compelled him to remain silent.

"I find only one orchid," he said. "The climb—it make me cough, so I rest often. You like this one, M'sieur?"

But Gort's eyes did not leave the child's lips; smeared with blood from a recent hæmorrhage, they made him shudder.

"You've overdone things, feller," he chided, slipping a handkerchief from his pocket and holding it forward. "Was it a bad attack?"

"No, M'sieur."

"Well, you look pretty dreadful, anyway."

"I lost a lot of blood and——"

"We start for home right away," Angélique interrupted, fear sounding in her voice for the first time that day. "I carry you on my back as far as the mountain. Our basket we leave here."

The child, however, had other ideas; for ere Gort could lay a hand on him he was running across the clearance.

"I'll race you there," he called. "Come on, Angélique."

But Fate had decreed that this, the last of little Butch's many laughing challenges, would go unanswered.

Dusk was settling over the Valley of Sounds when they arrived back at Makeeta to find a taxi waiting.

During the long walk Gort had not been given the opportunity of discussing anything of a personal nature with

Angélique, because for practically every yard of the way little Butch had remained close at hand, and now all chances of his having a few minutes alone with the radiantly happy girl vanished as Paul La Folette called:

"It is lucky you are early, M'amselle. My wife, she has the fever and is very sick—we go straight away if you please."

"I'm so sorry," Angélique sympathized. "Who's looking after her?"

"Madame Beïto, but she has an appointment and must leave at seven o'clock."

"I've a better idea," Gort said as they gained the taxi. "You both have tea with me and we'll drive back later."

"Not tonight, darling," she said, opening the door. "By then Poppa would be at his silly club, and I have much to talk over with him."

"About us, Angélique?"

"Yes, I tell him everything." She smiled. "Tomorrow I come here first thing and let you know what happens."

"Sure you wouldn't prefer me to come with you, honey?"

"Not this time. I must speak with Poppa alone."

"I'm afraid you may find him difficult."

"Perhaps, but when Poppa realizes how I feel I'm sure everything will be all right."

Little Butch pulled at Gort's sleeve:

"Can I come tomorrow too, M'sieur?"

"Of course you can."

"Then I'll——"

The impatient driver spoke:

"Please you jump in—we go."

As the car leapt forward Angélique leaned out of the window:

"Happy, darling?" she asked.

"Sure am, honey," Gort called back. "Sure am."

CHAPTER XXIII

LITTLE did Angélique and her young friend realize as they stood at Dr. Balant's front gate watching Paul La Folette's taxi gliding down Rue Picanon that tragedy was lurking behind them.

The tropic night had achieved absolute perfection over the last quarter of an hour, for not a cloud had dared intrude upon the majesty that glowed in heaven's dark-blue face. The harbour had never looked so beautiful—placid as an Italian lake, it reflected with the clearness of a recently polished mirror the glory of far-away things. Every road which by daylight appeared as man had made them, rock, gravel and clay, were transformed into gleaming avenues draped ribbon-like across the hillside. Palm clusters also had taken on a new aspect—very regal and still, they etched in silhouette fantastic designs along two horizons. As for the waterfront, nothing stirred down there except a flowing tide, and even it was subdued as in quiet whispers it paid homage to the awe-inspiring splendour of moon and stars.

In such a setting only the most blasé could remain unmoved. Everything was so quiet, had assumed the sanctity of a vast cathedral. From afar came the faint melancholy voices of Tonkinese, and close by a child's tired eyes were being cooed to sleep by a mother's lullaby. These sounds alone carried into the Vila scene a reminder of living things.

Who then would have believed that this night was to herald tragedy, would be talked of for years to come? The very word seemed incongruous and a sacrilege. Already, however, blood had been smeared across this peaceful landscape and death, like a monstrous figure, was still on the prowl. But how were Angélique and little Butch to foresee or even sense the danger as, faces uplifted, they stood staring towards that indescribable magic of blue and gold?

"Can you ever remember such a night as this?" the girl asked presently. "Just look at those stars, countless millions of them swimming around the dome of heaven and all the time they are winking at us in such a friendly way."

"The moon too—he is happy," little Butch muttered,

"smiling for you and M'sieur Saunders. Soon now there'll be a big wedding, I know it."

Angélique's laugh rivalled her eyes for pure unsophisticated joy:

"Ah—we must not think too fast, darling," she warned, ruffling his hair. "Tonight my poor head is full of dreams, but who knows?—perhaps M'sieur Gort might not want to marry for a long time yet. That we have not even talked about."

"You will tomorrow, though, won't you?"

"Maybe."

"Angélique?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Everything's turned out so nicely, hasn't it?"

"Wonderfully," she said, pushing open the gate. "I'll see you tomorrow, darling."

As Angélique, smiling happily, climbed the stairs, Dr. Balant was just turning into Rue Higginson on his way to the club. For almost twenty years he had lived in mortal dread of the dark abyss, and tonight he had arrived at its very edge. There was no turning back or way of escape; circumstances had forced his hand, offered him no alternative; but before taking that last fatal step, he needed half a dozen pernod—something to quench if only, for an hour this all-consuming fire in his soul. "Ah, Mon Dieu!" he kept muttering. "Ah, Mon Dieu!"

Humming a song his father had taught him in the long ago, little Butch walked home along the Rue du Condominion. Light of heart, he did not hurry. Once when a huge black moth brushed against his face he laughed and, caught by the spirit of this gorgeous night, chased the insect for a hundred yards back along the road, then having captured it, held the trembling body in his cupped hands for a moment before bidding it adieu. A few minutes later, when a car drew up beside him, he had paused again to say a few words to the French Resident Commissioner. It was very kind of M'sieur, but he didn't feel a scrap tired. Oh, yes, he'd been running; was quite out of breath really. No—no, only chasing a black moth. Why, of course, Angélique had been with him. They'd spent the whole day in the Valley of Sounds, and tomorrow would be returning to Makeeta. So Jake Larkins had been in town all afternoon—very drunk, eh? Well, perhaps he'd better hurry on home now. "Good night, M'sieur."

An electric clock in the Vila radio station showed the time to be exactly 8.30 when little Butch, his face white and drawn, pushed open the door.

Startled, Dave Brown, who sat at a desk filling in the log of the day's business, uttered a gruff "Say, what's the idea?" but after one look at the boy's staring eyes he rose quickly, adding: "Seen a ghost or something, mate?"

Little Butch ran an unsteady hand across his lips. He knew that even a few seconds of weakness on his part would defeat the purpose of this unannounced visit. Murder was in the boy's heart, cold premeditated murder, but Dave Brown must not sense it, otherwise the thing he wanted most in this life would be denied him. He swallowed hard before speaking:

"I do not feel very well, M'sieur. Today I go swimming and all along the road I cough."

"Then sit down and take it easy," the man said, pushing a chair towards his guest. "I'll be back in a moment."

When Dave Brown returned to the room he carried a small glass in one hand and a flask of brandy in the other. While pouring out a small nip he kept his eyes on the restlessly pacing boy.

"Thought I told you to sit down," he reminded, holding forward the glass. "Got a belly-ache or something?"

"No, but my chest is very sore, M'sieur."

"Well, drink this—meanwhile, I'll phone M'amselle Balant and see if she can come here."

"No—no, please don't do that," little Butch pleaded. "She is so happy tonight and I do not want to worry her—I'll be better directly."

"Ask me and I'd say you should be in hospital. Anyway, get that into you."

"What is it, M'sieur?"

"Brandy."

"I'd rather not if——"

"Drink it—all in one go, too."

The neat spirit made little Butch gasp for breath, but, once down, his heaving stomach seemed more settled. Handing back the tumbler, he expelled a quick breath, at which Brown asked: "Feel all knotted up, don't you, mate?"

"I've had a long day, M'sieur."

"Where?"

"Makeeta—with Angélique and M'sieur Saunders."

The man laughed shortly. He had nothing against Gert, but was human enough to resent another member of his sex

enjoying almost a complete monopoly of M'amselle Balant's company.

"They're very thick, I'm told."

"They love each other, M'sieur."

The sneer on Brown's lips broadened:

"Fast workers, the Yanks, aren't they, mate?"

Little Butch shrugged. He was far too upset to care what his companion thought of Angélique and M'sieur Gort. Another thing, if he remained in here much longer there was every possibility of his breaking down, and that he dare not do. Strengthened by the thought, he looked straight at Brown: "I want you to do me a favour, M'sieur."

"What?"

"Your rifle, cān I borrow it and a few cartridges?"

The other's eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Why?"

"There's a mad dog at our place—I'm going to shoot it."

"Jake Larkins, eh?"

"Oh, no, M'sieur—I said a dog."

"Sure you're telling the truth?"

"I've no reason to lie, M'sieur," the child answered calmly.

"This dog I have not seen before, and Mummy is very scared."

Brown walked to the end of the room. Like most people in Vila he pitied little Butch, but tonight the boy seemed different, looked as though—

"Please let me have your rifle, M'sieur."

"I don't think I will," the radio operator returned, taking up a place by the window. "You know every dog around these parts, should do, anyway; yet you come here and say the one at your place is a stranger." He smiled. "Apart from that, you've got the jitters badly, so why not come clean and tell me what really happened?"

Little Butch stood his ground. It was apparent to him that Brown required something much more plausible before he would hand over the rifle; therefore the only course left open to him was to bluff his way out.

"Perhaps you would rather shoot it yourself, M'sieur. If so, come with me."

Taken aback by this challenge, Brown glanced at the clock, then down at little Butch:

"So there's really a dog there?"

"Yes, M'sieur."

"But what makes you think it's mad?"

"I know he is."

"How?"

"By the way he crouches on our veranda snarling all the time."

"On your veranda?"

"Yes, Mummy closed the back door on him."

"When?"

"Just before I arrived home—he almost bit me, M'sieur."

"I'm beginning to catch on now," the radio operator said, moving towards a bunk and taking from it a new Remington rifle. "You walked right into the brute, eh?"

"That's right—I got such a fright."

"Look like it too," Brown sympathized, slipping six cartridges into the gun's magazine. "We'll soon fix him up, though—come with me."

Little Butch was still standing flat-footed, wondering what he could say to keep his companion from accompanying him, when the radio apparatus buzzed into life.

"Better not leave now, M'sieur," he advised, with evident relief. "Isn't it a message coming through?"

"Yes, damnit," Brown muttered, at the same time surrendering his rifle. "Better count me out, mate—be careful now."

.

As little Butch jogged along the moon-drenched road his thoughts kept returning to Angélique dressed as a bride, and despite the agony swirling within him, the child smiled. Oh, yes, they would be terribly shocked, but neither of them knew he'd only a short while to live, so it didn't make much difference. Strange the way he'd found out, though. Instead of waiting where Sister Almond left him, he'd crept over to the surgery's closed door and heard her say: "Mr. Saunders has just arrived with little Butch, wants you to examine him." There had been a long silence, then Dr. Anderson's voice: "An absolute waste of time—you know as well as I do the boy's riddled with consumption—can't live more than a few months."

Little Butch sucked some air into the very bottom of his bleeding lungs. Oh, yes, he'd been really brave that night, had sat looking at those photographs, just as if each one was of great interest, but all the time he was thinking of dying, and leaving Angélique, M'sieur Gort and his poor Mummy.

The boy's eyes under their mist of tears showed panic. Of course, the thought of going to hell scared him; he'd always said his prayers and tried to do good deeds so that one day

God would accept him in heaven, but after tonight he'd be placed in the devil's keeping for ever. Even the thought made him want to scream. Little Butch again inhaled deeply, coughed and slowed his jogging feet to a walk. Where would he wait tonight? Well, seeing Jake Larkins always came in the back way, he'd take up a place near the steps.

Gaining the side entrance of their house, the boy halted, and placing Brown's rifle aside, gripped the sagging fence with both hands. For some minutes his poor disease-ravaged body straightened and bent under the blows of violent coughing. Blood, saliva and sweat stained the grass at his feet, was spewed half-way across the weed-covered footpath, but immediately the attack passed he wiped his lips and moved cautiously towards the steps.

Madame White, her face smashed almost beyond recognition, lay in exactly the same position as he had discovered her. She was sprawled on her back, one hand still gripping a broken gin bottle, the other a fistful of Jake Larkins' hair. The dead woman's eyes were wide open, yet as the whimpering child bent over her they seemed somehow to smile, looked kinder and clearer than he had seen them for years.

From that moment little Butch lost count of time or events. After warming some water he knelt by his mother's side trying to wash her face free of blood and later had taken a sheet from his own bed and spread it over her body. This done, he had worked quickly, swept the veranda free of broken glass, tidied every room, even gathered some flowers and arranged them as best he could in the hope of creating a good impression on anyone who entered after the fatal shots.

Near eleven o'clock he took up his position on the steps. He hoped Larkins would not be long, for it hurt him to sit there looking up at those lovely stars with so much hate in his heart. He didn't like feeling this way, yet—— Was that the side gate opening?

As Jake Larkins pushed aside the sweet-smelling hibiscus bushes and stepped into the brilliant moonlight he noticed little Butch with gun poised ready. Drunk beyond any sense of danger, he lurched forward, had almost gained the steps when a bullet tearing into his chest made him stumble. Grunting, the intoxicated man half rose.

"For God's sake don't kill me," he pleaded, scrambling to his knees. "Yer Ma asked for it, son, honest she did. Tried to kill me with a bottle and——"

Little Butch did not hesitate. Squeezing the trigger three

times, he waited until Larkins' body had ceased twitching, then rose and moved indoors. A few seconds later Brown's rifle spoke again; this time, however, its sound was muffled, did not puncture the night with that sharp ping of the previous reports, for tiny lips were closed about its cold muzzle, lips which never again would mutter: "I'll race you to the mountain, Angélique."

It was after eleven o'clock when Dr. Balant walked out of the now almost deserted Dijon Club. Half an hour earlier it had been crowded with members, but within a few minutes of a very agitated Frenchman rushing in with the news of the night's happening most of the players had departed in haste.

From his table Dr. Balant had heard of the tragedy without turning a hair. Though fond of little Butch, he was far too absorbed in his troubles to give more than a passing thought to those of anyone else, hence his remaining seated while others streamed out of the doors.

This feeling of detachment grew to complete indifference when, on crossing Rue Higginson, he felt an arm slip through one of his. He knew it was Angélique, could feel her silent grief pouring all over him, yet tonight for the first time in years his heart could not react to hers. For all he cared, little Butch might have been just a Vila legend, and Angélique some sentimental child who cried without making a sound.

They had almost reached Rue de Paris before the dry sobs in her throat became audible.

The man's voice came thick, yet unemotional:

"When did you hear about it, dear?"

She tried to speak but could not, and he went on:

"There are occasions in life, my pretty one, when the tragedies of others do not strike very deeply. Larkins, as you know, was all bad, his mistress not much better, and little Butch——" Dr. Balant paused to stroke the cold fingers curled about his left wrist. "Well—he was dying anyway, everyone around here knew it, yet, like myself, kept the news from you."

"Dying, Poppa?"

"Yes, darling. For some months prior to your arriving back I suspected the worst, so one morning when he came to our place with a message from M'sieur Nebrac, I bullied him into having an X-ray. The plates are still in my study—show two badly affected lungs."

"Oh, Poppa!"

"At the best he couldn't have seen Christmas out, Angélique, so where, I ask, is there cause for grief?"

"Because I loved him, Poppa."

"But surely you would prefer the unfortunate boy to end his suffering the way he did than waste away before your eyes, dear?"

"Either way would have hurt me terribly," Angélique whispered, "but when I reached their house and saw my little friend that way—ah, it was awful—awful."

His hand was now pressed firmly against hers.

"Who told you, darling?"

"M'sieur Brown."

"Were the police there?"

"Yes—they asked me many questions."

"What about?"

"The exact time little Butch left me, did he seem depressed or hint at doing away with that dreadful man. For a long while they asked me these silly things, then I leave and am over a mile along the road to Makeeta when I get frightened, think I hear little Butch beside me—that's why you found me waiting outside the club."

Doctor Balant drew them both to an abrupt halt, yet some seconds elapsed before he asked the question which since the tragedy had been running through his mind like a lost river. He realized all too well the chances of Angélique's falling in with his plans were slight, but he was a desperate man to-night, so desperate and wretched that a black void seemed to slide down the hillside and engulf him as he spoke.

"If I book our passages to France on the next boat will you come with me, darling?"

For answer she slipped her arm from his and walked to the edge of the footpath, stood gazing across to Iririki Island, remote and dreamlike in its bed of moon-caressed waters:

"Well, Angélique?" he asked presently. "Well?"

"For you I would do most things, Poppa," she muttered, turning. "But when I left Paris I had only two loves, you and little Butch. Since then, however, I've grown up, become a woman and as such I claim the privilege of remaining where my heart belongs—with M'sieur Gort."

Dr. Balant ran an unsteady hand across his face, then taking her arm, moved off towards the house. He heard Angélique crying. Her grief seemed to keep time with his slowly moving feet, yet there was nothing he could say to comfort her, for tonight she would step with him into the dark abyss.

CHAPTER XXIV

BY the time they entered the lounge she felt more composed. The first terrible impact of little Butch's death had passed and her eyes, though badly inflamed about the lids, were free of tears.

"I'll light the lamp," she said, after watching three matches flare up and as quickly die in her father's fumbling fingers. "Give the box to me, Poppa."

With the mantle aglow, she slid its globe into position, then began pumping further life into the lamp's warming cylinders. Soft illumination caressed all four walls before she straightened and moved towards the hall.

"Not thinking of going to bed, are you, darling?" the man asked.

"No, Poppa—I'm going to ask Alberno to make you some coffee."

"I gave him the night off; Burea too." Dr. Balant gave a nervous smile. "We're all alone, my pretty one, quite alone."

Her puzzled gaze was concentrated on the quivering muscles of his jaw:

"Then I'll make some myself, it will only take—

"No, Angélique," he interrupted, pointing towards a chair. "Sit down and wait for me. I won't be long."

She did not move:

"What's wrong with you, Poppa?"

"Wrong?"

"Yes, those little muscles in your face are twitching and jumping."

"So is my heart, darling."

"Very upset, aren't you?"

"Terrified."

"That is such an ugly word," she muttered, pressing her hands together. "Ever since I met M'sieur Saunders you are different. Once we were so close, Poppa—went everywhere together, but now there is no gladness in your eyes when you look at me and every day draws us further apart. I—I do not understand."

He stood for a long minute gazing down at her with an

expression of great wistfulness masking his face. The years were slipping away. He was young again, and while a hurricane pushed against his creaking hut a woman groaned in labour. Everything was revealed with supernatural clearness, the reed-covered floor, a struggling fire casting shadows, which to him took on the shape of animals and snakes in their most frightening forms. The furniture, primitive native pieces, bamboo shaped to crude imitations of the chairs, tables and bed he had brought from France. The woman, her face glistening with sweat, calling out "*Je ne peux le supporter plus.*" Himself, unshaven, naked but for a pair of dirty shorts, glaring across through drugged eyes at the expectant mother, jeering at her and his own shame. An hour later bending over—

Angélique's voice brought him back to the present:

"Please do not stare at me like that, Poppa."

"Sorry, darling," he said, moving down the hall. "So sorry."

When Dr. Balant returned to the room he looked a new man. This, because for the first time in almost two decades morphine was spreading through his blood-stream to bolster up what ten minutes before had been a cringing, gutless personality. Through millions of decaying brain cells the drug flowed, infusing a false buoyancy, tearing down barriers of inhibition that earlier had been unsurmountable, steadying his trembling hands, filling the man with an unreal sense of reality.

Sensing the change in him, Angélique spoke from the doorway:

"Would you mind if I go to bed now, Poppa?"

"For your own sake, I don't think you'd better, dear," he said, lighting a cheroot and sinking on to one of the chair's arm-rests. "I've just prepared myself to ask and answer a lot of questions. Therefore, you must remain with me—sit down, child."

"If what you have to say concerns M'sieur Saunders, I'll stand," she answered, leaning forward with palms down on the table. "It was also my intention to discuss him with you, but I'd much rather leave it until later—tomorrow, perhaps."

He was staring right through her:

"If we only had the question of M'sieur Saunders to settle I'd agree with you, Angélique. Unfortunately, however, there's a ghost sitting on my shoulder; it's been there for years." The speaker gave an unnatural smile. "Had circumstances

permitted I would have carried this awful burden to the grave, but as your father and in justice to everyone concerned I must be brutally frank tonight."

His statement more than startled the girl. Her bent figure straightened, seemed to grow in height, and the little colour her cheeks had retained was replaced by a sickening pallor.

Since, arriving home from Paris her father's strange demeanour and his refusal to be drawn into any conversation associated with Niutoo had sown a dreadful thought in Angélique's mind. Only last week this fear had taken on a much more definite form during a nightmare. In it she had seen her father digging a grave. Nearby in the jungle stretched a white woman, attired in a pale-blue satin negligée. Very fair and beautiful of feature, she appeared to be asleep—asleep until the onlooker, moving closer, noticed those dark bruises left by a strangler's hands about the white throat. Here Angélique had awakened to find herself in a lather of nervous sweat. Several times since then memories of this vision troubled her, but as the days went on these worrying thoughts had eventually retreated into the background.

Now, however, as she walked slowly towards her father, the dream took on a terrible significance. Sober reason had given way to speculation, and already she was trying to make excuses for the murder she felt sure he'd committed under great provocation.

"I think I know what you're going to tell me, Poppa," she whispered. "Ordinarily I do not believe in dreams, but one night last week I saw everything so plainly."

"You saw what?" he asked, rising quickly to his feet.

"A lot of things." She stopped within arms' reach of him. "Your digging that grave, my mother, the marks on her neck—everything."

"Marks on her neck?" Dr. Balant repeated, leaning back heavily against the wall. "My dear girl, what are you talking about? Admittedly, I buried your mother, but she died a few minutes after you were born—that I can prove, so why all this wild talk of marks on her neck?"

"I saw them, Poppa."

"Angélique?"

"Yes."

"When did you have this dream?"

"Last Tuesday night."

"And in it you saw your mother?"

"I knew it was she, Poppa."

"Why?"

"Because she was so like me—only fairer of skin."

Despite his drugged state the man swayed, but recovering quickly moved over to the cocktail cabinet and while filling a glass with whisky, he spoke:

"For the third time, sit down, darling."

Trembling, she did so, sat watching her father's bent shoulders and his long white hair pressed against the back of a sweat-stained collar:

"Please don't drink any more of that," she pleaded when he again reached for the decanter. "How many times have you said it doesn't mix with pernod, brings on your bad heads?"

He glanced over his shoulder:

"Have you noticed any difference in me tonight, darling?"

"Yes, Poppa—your eyes have a stare I've not noticed before."

"Do you know why?"

"Because you've had much drink."

"Pernod does not steady a man's hand, Angélique," he said, crossing the room, "nor give him temporary courage, but morphine does, and tonight I'm under its influence for the first time since you were born."

"Oh, Poppa!"

"It's true, Angélique." The index finger of his right hand was caressing her blanched, uplifted face. "Right through your life I've been a coward, hated and dreaded the past as one does the reminder of a great human wrong." The speaker halted, drew hard at his cheroot and continued like a man fighting for words: "You see, darling, over both our heads there has always been a cloud. Ah, no, I did not say anything—my lips were sealed, but tonight the whole awful truth must be made known to you and I'm afraid, child—afraid of so many things."

After the second attempt, Angélique spoke:

"You are going to tell me about my mother?"

"Yes, dear," he murmured, drawing up a chair close to hers and sitting down. "Perhaps I should have told you years ago, but always I kept putting it off because you were so young. Then before I realized it you had reached adolescence and again I could not bring myself to break your heart." Dr. Balant spread out his hands. "Now because of my procrastination you've fallen in love. That makes two tragedies where once there would have been only one."

Her lips hardly moved:

"Why, Poppa?"

"Because you can never marry M'sieur Saunders."

She was sitting very straight, her long, beautifully manicured finger-nails pressing against the chair's yielding upholstery.

"I—I do not understand what you mean—do not understand."

"Ah, we will go right back," he said, rising, "but first I have another drink. You too, darling."

"No, Poppa."

"Please." He had reached the cabinet and was pouring out two whiskies. "Just a small one with soda, eh?"

"As you know I do not touch it."

"Then champagne?"

"On a night like this?" Her eyes seemed to be boring a hole right through his back. "With little Butch dead and my heart full of fear, you ask me to drink champagne, Poppa?"

He stood motionless, staring up at his own shadow spread across part of the ceiling. Once he laughed, made as if to hurl his glass at those jeering figures creeping across the wall, but when she cried out in alarm he placed the still-unsipped spirit back on the cabinet and lit another cheroot. Its tip was ringed by grey ash before he spoke:

"Like you I was once in love, Angélique, had a great career for the asking, too. But this, of course, you know. Also, how as a young man I landed at Niutoo with my heart full of dreams." Dr. Balant turned slowly. "For a while I did very well. Father Flanagan of the Mission Station welcomed me with open arms, and within six months patients were coming to me from practically every island in the group." The speaker smiled, naturally this time. "They were good days, Angélique; I was young and whenever a boat called it brought bundles of mail from Annabella. My family, too, who though still bitterly disappointed because of my leaving Paris, had more or less forgiven me.

"So time passed," he continued. "With Father Flanagan's help I built a fine house, and in between attending to the sick started trading in copra. Two years went by. I had become rich in my own right. Everywhere I went presents were heaped upon me. Natives, some of whom I'd treated for such mild ailments as toothache or cramp, filled my shed with coconuts." The man shrugged. "Having established myself, I wrote asking Annabella to join me, but it was not to be. Always very attached to her father, she made it quite clear

that unless I tore myself away from Niutoo our love must wait. Six months later, while reading a batch of letters just to hand, I heard of my father's death and three months later the ship carrying my mother to me was wrecked near Pago Pago with the loss of all passengers and crew."

Dr. Balant halted, gulped down the whisky he had previously placed aside and moved slowly towards Angélique, who a few moments before had taken up a position near the door. "Deeply shocked, a prey to a new kind of loneliness, I carried on with my work, but it was not the same. I started drinking, and from it turned to drugs. At that stage I only wanted one little push to become a hopeless addict. It came in another letter. Annabella, having lost faith in me, had accepted a proposal of marriage." The distressed man was breathing heavily now, for the morphine which he had hoped would see him safely through this crisis was already losing its effect. His eyes were still veiled by the drug's glassy curtain, but over the past five minutes emotion kept threatening to get the better of him, and his hands had already taken on their habitual tremor. Angélique's silence did not help him. She stood like a figure carved in pure white ivory, leaning back against the door-frame. Only her gaze moved, followed him from place to place.

"What happened after that is not easy to tell, darling," he went on presently. "It's full of shame, indignity and regret, but remember the circumstances. I was a lonely man. Father Flanagan had been transferred and his successor I did not like. Aloof and very young, he couldn't understand the frailties of human nature, so I had no one to talk with, no one who could help me when a kind word or action was so badly needed. Then one day Chief Moretta sent for me. 'He is dying,' the boy said. Would I please go to him with my white magic." In an agitated movement Dr. Balant pressed the glowing end of his cheroot into an ash-tray. "Six months earlier I would have refused. His village was over 100 miles from Niutoo, an island called Awru, and with a hurricane threatening I had every justification for not accepting this mission, but I did"—the speaker looked up—"not because I was the only medical man within reach, far from it. Since coming to Niutoo I had heard many exciting stories about Chief Moretta. He was, so everyone told me, a most intelligent fellow, a handsome giant who, according to Father Flanagan, ran his rich island as the only true democracy in the South Seas."

Dr. Balant paused again, shuddered and continued with quickening tempo:

"There had been mentioned also his beautiful daughter Ampota, and always I'd listened to the same description—tall, more brown than black, features so finely moulded as to rival a——"

The river of her father's voice flowed on, but Angélique caught only a word here and there. She tried to scream, to rush out of this stifling room, but horror held her there. She knew what was coming, sensed it, as a swimmer senses death—when, gasping for breath, he is dragged beneath the surface by a sucking current. Terror—misery—shame were hammering against her wildly beating heart. The blood in her veins seemed suddenly to freeze, yet she could not move, could not utter a sound.

Stammering occasionally, always groping for words, her father, his face drawn tight, went on. But Angélique had ceased to listen, the furniture—walls, pictures—everything was going round, and into her mind, drowned in horror, only snatches of what he said penetrated.

"Hurricane . . . three days . . . ruptured appendix . . . saved him though . . . Ampota walking into my hut . . . an astonishing moment . . . a bronze goddess wrapped in stars . . . Chief Moretta's recovery . . . offered me half his island . . . I decided to stay . . . no will-power left . . . supply of morphine running low . . . native marriage ceremony . . . months later . . . terrible realization . . . love turning to hate . . . Ampota more beautiful than ever, but many scenes . . . she attempts suicide, carried from the surf half dead . . . a hurricane blowing . . . God's voice . . . my degradation . . . Ampota and child . . . I stood with you . . . so small and white . . . she was dead . . . Chief Moretta very angry . . . a canoe . . . both of us alone under a blazing sun . . . goat's milk in a bottle . . . back at Niutoo . . . three years, you are a beautiful little girl; I . . ."

A scream brought Dr. Balant stumbling towards Angélique, but even as his hands went out to grip her rigid figure she ran into the majestic night. Flying feet had carried her past Rue du Condominion before he reached the front gate, and in a matter of seconds she was out of sight.

Calling her name, he followed, but on stopping to fill his choking lungs with air at the corner of Rue du Comte Esperanza he noticed a car backing out of M'sieur Belloc's drive. The vehicle was about to move off when he reached it.

"Please, my daughter, did you see her pass?—she went along this way, I think."

"Hurry, Jacques," Commissioner Nebrac urged, throwing open the door. "I was sitting on the veranda when I noticed Angélique run past. Whatever's happened?"

"Do not ask me now, Maurice," Dr. Balant pleaded, falling rather than stepping into the car. "Just help me find her, but please we must not wait a second."

During the subsequent ten minutes they drove in almost complete silence. Occasionally M'sieur Nebrac, when turning into another road, would try and reassure his friend with a quiet "She must have come along this way, Jacques." But when street after street had been searched in vain, he, too, became apprehensive.

They had covered every road in the British residential quarters and were sitting debating what to do next when that unmistakable sound of a woman sobbing brought both men's shoulders stiffly upright.

Commissioner Nebrac was first to reach the cemetery. Here, however, he waited, and when joined by his companion, pointed towards a figure which stood not thirty yards away.

"Be careful, Jacques," he warned. "She's only a step from the cliff. We must not frighten her."

But Dr. Balant had long since passed beyond reasoning. His bursting heart heeded only one voice. "Save her from going over, you fool," it said; "that drop is a good forty feet, and——"

"Angélique!" he shouted, stumbling forward. "Angélique!"

Twenty yards, his heavy feet grew lighter; fifteen yards, he was running at a speed born of desperation, ten yards. He stumbled, fell, and on rising whispered a shocked "Oh, Mon Dieu!" as Angélique, without a word or a glance at him, stepped into space.

For a second or two mental agony paralysed the man. He just stood there swaying from side to side like a tree cut through and ready to fall, then with his eyes closed, hands clenched, shoulders carried straighter than they had been for years, Dr. Balant took those six fatal steps.

Maurice Nebrac, he knew, was close behind him, but neither God nor man could halt his body now. How cool and exciting it felt to go hurtling through space without wings or——

CHAPTER XXV

DAWN was spreading itself like a string of crushed pearls on the eastern horizon when Jimmy, his black body nude but for a pair of cotton shorts, placed a hand on Gort's shoulder.

"Sleep no more, master, big fella boss come long way Vila—hurry."

The white man, trained for such moments as this by years of soldiering, sat up quickly: "Who is it?"

"Big boss from Iririki—he wait outside."

"You mean Sir George?"

"Yes, master."

"Oh!—what's the time?"

"Soon day," Jimmy said, holding forward his employer's dressing-gown. "Sun come along quick, very hot, not long. Here your one stick leg, master."

Sir George was standing in the darkened lounge-room when Gort's torch picked out his visitor's tall figure.

"Well, this is a surprise," he was about to say, but with only two words uttered, the other interrupted:

"We've no time to spare, old chap. Get dressed and I'll see you in my car."

Sensing trouble, Gort came to a halt:

"What's happened, Sir George?"

"Far too much to explain in a few words," the Commissioner returned, with that assumed calm of a man who, though deeply affected, refuses to allow emotion to take control. "I'll explain everything on our way back to town—meanwhile, I'd advise you to hurry."

In his anxiety it took Gort much longer to dress than ordinarily; in fact, ten minutes later when he scrambled into the car, both shoe laces were untied and his shirt unbuttoned.

"Sure must be mighty bad to bring you here at this hour," he said, closing the door. "Has there been a murder or something?"

As his car leapt forward the other asked:

"Bring any smokes with you, Saunders?"

"Don't believe I did."

"Then take these. Light one for me like a good fellow—there's a gadget in the dash."—

"Thanks."

Pressing the lighter, Gort waited until its glass centre changed from white to red, then after handing his companion a cigarette, repeated the procedure. Not until he had taken three hungry puffs did he speak: "O.K., Sir George—I'm ready."

The driver changed into a noisy third gear. "I think you must have been born under an unlucky star, Saunders."

"Why?"

"Well, first there was Murphy. Now little Butch and——"

"Hæmorrhaging badly, is he?"

"Worse, old chap."

"Not dead?"

"A case of double murder by the look of it," the driver speculated without change of voice. "That swine Larkins really got going on Madame White yesterday.* Apparently, happened late in the afternoon, because at five-thirty he was seen staggering along Rue Higginson." Sir George sighed. "Little Butch spent almost the whole day with you and Angélique—right?"

"Yeh," Gort whispered, "yeh."

The Resident Commissioner swung his car around a sharp bend, then went on:

"Of course, no one knows what really happened, but this much is clear. On returning home and seeing his mother, the poor kid borrowed Brown's—he's our local radio operator—rifle on the pretext of wanting to shoot a mad dog—or something like that, and when Larkins showed up pumped four bullets into him."

"Killed him?"

"Stone dead."

"But no jury would convict little Butch for killing that brute," Gort muttered, running both hands up and down his thighs—"not if I've got to bring the best lawyer——"

"Hold on till I've finished, old chap—you see, matters didn't stop with the death of Larkins."

"Oh—I——"

"How are your nerves this morning, Saunders?"

"All right, I guess."

"Better be, too."

"Why?"

"Because from now on I've got some very dreadful things to tell you."

"About little Butch?"

"We'll take him first—the child's dead."

"God!"

"He committed suicide after finishing off Larkins."

They were out of the valley before Gort roused himself. Shock had given him a defence against visible grief. Outwardly he looked quite unmoved, had sat there for almost five minutes without a word or sound passing his lips, but now as he drew himself forward on the seat and glanced towards Sir George, his face bore evidence of a deep inward hurt:

"The woman," he whispered, "what became of her?"

"She's dead, too, old chap."

"The whole three of them?"

"Yes, the whole three."

"Taking me to little guy now, are you?"

"No, Saunders, I'm not."

"Then where?"

"To the French hospital."

"Not much good my seeing——"

"How about another smoke, Saunders?"

"Sure."

"Mind doing the honours again?"

"Reckon not. I don't want one, though. Feel kinda sick."

"Don't doubt it," Sir George sympathized, taking the lighted cigarette from his companion's cold fingers. "Trouble is, you're not out of the wood yet—not by a long way."

Gort's lips dappled with sweat broke into a hard unlovely grin: "I get it, the police want to ask a few questions, eh?"

"That, of course, goes without saying."

"Don't suspect me of bumping off Larkins, do they?"

"Good heavens, no."

"Well, at least——"

"I say, Saunders?"

"Yes?"

"Apropos of questions, would you mind my asking a few?"

"Not at all."

"Did Angélique ever give you any reason to believe that things were not all they should be between the old man and herself?"

"Several times."

"What did she say?"

"He'd become very queer."

"Taken umbrage at you two seeing so much of each other, eh?"

"Sort of."

"How do you feel about Angélique?"

"I'm in love with her."

"I see—and she is with you, I suppose?"

"Don't know why." Gort, who had been idly fingering a bunch of keys hanging from the ignition lock, looked around: "She's got everything and I so damned little."

"That's a matter of opinion," the other said, steering his car to the roadside and applying the brakes. "What actually took place at Dr. Balant's home no one will ever know," he went on, "but early this morning while Maurice Nebrac was at some friends of his, Angélique ran past sobbing her heart out."

Sir George did not meet his passenger's startled gaze, for over the past few hours he'd witnessed sufficient human distress to satisfy him for a lifetime. Awful business, he mused, sitting right next to a man who——

Gort spoke: "Come on, Mister—come on."

"Well, as I was saying," the other resumed after a slight hesitation, "Angélique ran past and just as Nebrac was backing his car on to the road, Dr. Balant jumped in beside him." The Commissioner sighed. "When I arrived around one-thirty this morning at the French hospital, my colleague was in an almost hysterical condition, but I eventually quietened the poor fellow down. He told me a terrible story, Saunders."

Gort tried to speak, but when no sound passed his gaping lips, the older man coughed:

"After searching for some time they found Angélique; she was standing on the edge of a cliff within a mile of here. Nebrac implored the Doctor to approach his daughter quietly. But the old fellow rushed like a demented being towards——"

"For God's sake don't tell me she went over," Gort interrupted, gripping his companion's arm. "Not true, is it?"

"Yes, Saunders, it is—both of them."

"Oh, Jesus!"

"When I left the hospital, she was still alive, but her father died hours—— Hey, old chap, where are you going?"

"Getting out of this car."

"Now don't be——"

"Take your hands off me, will you?"

"But I'm only trying——"

Gort slammed the door, then without a word began shuffling along Erakor Road. He had covered a good fifty yards before Sir George's car in low gear drew abreast of him.

"Hop in, Saunders, we're almost there."

"Go away."

"I'll do nothing of the sort."

"Well, leave me alone, will you?"

"In that state?"

"I'll be O.K."

"I say old chap?"

"Yeh?"

"Walk and there's every chance of your being too late."

"I am already—she's dead."

"Don't think that way, Saunders."

"Sir George?"

"Well?"

"Sorry I was so damned rude."

"Forget it."

"Did you see Angélique?"

"No—she was in the theatre when I got there."

"Who's operating?"

"Dr. Brashuet, he's a good surgeon."

"Where's Anderson?"

"He's assisting—I sent for him."

"The old man didn't push her over, did he?"

"No—she jumped."

"Jesus!"

"How about get'ing in now, Saunders?"

"Better not. I feel like putting my fist through something—your windscreen, for instance."

"Wouldn't try that, old chap—it's shatter-proof."

"How far is the hospital from here?"

"About a quarter of a mile."

"When we get there will you go in first—tell me what to expect?"

"Of course."

"If Angélique's dead, just nod and I'll scram."

"No—you'll be coming with me."

"Where?"

"To my place—until it's all over."

"When's the next boat due here, Sir George?"

"The *Miranda*, on Wednesday."

"Swell."

"Thinking of leaving us, are you?"

"I will, if Angélique dies."

"She's young and has a fighting chance, old chap."

"After jumping from a cliff?"

"Fortunately it was not a very big drop, Saunders."

"Bad enough, anyway—how's her back?"

"They fear it's broken."

Gort staggered and reached for the door handle:

"Reckon I'd better crawl in with you," he whispered.

"Couldn't go another yard."

Despite the hour a crowd of about sixty whites and as many natives clustered around the hospital's front gate. When Sir George's car passed through, several people called to him, but the Commissioner did not even lift a hand in acknowledgment. As for Gort, he sat slumped in the wide bucket seat sweating from every pore yet chilled right through by a fear which every second seemed to intensify and darken.

He had been sitting in the car about twenty minutes when Sister Almond, attired in her uniform, walked on to the veranda. Seeing Gort, she waved, and while approaching muttered a somewhat uncertain:

"Just can't keep away from hospitals, can you, soldier?"

He attempted to return the smile but it was a poor effort:

"What are you doing here, anyway, Val?"

"I came with Dr. Anderson," she said, standing with one hand gripping the top of the car's half-open window. "He was a bit diffident about working in a strange theatre and asked me to come along. Things certainly went haywire last night, didn't they?"

"Sure did." Gort's eyes and voice were without hope. "How is she?"

"Without committing myself, I'd say very low."

"Back's broken, isn't it?"

"Who told you that?"

"Sir George."

"Well, he was misinformed," she interrupted curtly. "On arriving here we heard the same thing, but you can take it from me her back's all right."

She heard Gort expel a sharp breath, and a moment later noticed him getting out of the car. In silence they walked across a small patch of lawn, gained a path, followed it for some distance, then she spoke:

"I'm terribly sorry this happened to you. It's too much."

"I always was a lucky guy," he said, indicating a bench.

"Let's sit for a while—smoke?"

"Thanks, I will."

"That's the stuff."

She knew he was trying to appear brave, yet everything

about the man betrayed panic, his icy cold hands, his eyes, the way he was fumbling with those matches. When after four attempts one broke between his fingers, she took the box, saying: "They're getting scarce, better let me try."

The cigarettes measured less than an inch from their cork tips before he stirred:

"You were in the theatre, I gather, Val?"

"Oh, yés."

"Then what chance do you give Angélique?"

"I'm not in a position to say, Gort."

"I'm asking you nevertheless—as a friend."

"That doesn't make me a doctor, or my opinion worth anything, does it?"

"This is not the time or place for that high falutin professional stuff," he said impatiently. "How about being a bit human for a change?"

Had any other man spoken to her in such a manner, Sister Almond would probably have bitten his head off, but now after a quick glance at Gort's face, she sighed:

"Terribly in love with her, aren't you?"

"Damned right, I am."

"That's the pity of it."

"Why?"

"Because I've a horrible feeling you're going to be hurt again."

"I'm catching on," he murmured, flicking the cigarette across the path. "Not much hope, huh?"

She half turned on the bench:

"For the next five minutes I want you to forget I'm a Sister, Gort."

"I have."

"And whatever I say is off the record?"

"Sure."

"Very well." She began fiddling with a button attached to one of her stiff white cuffs. "No one could call Dr. Anderson a pessimist. He's far too keen about his work for that, and the French surgeon, whom he assisted, is made of the same stuff." She smiled sadly. "Before they started operating it became quite obvious to us, however, that their patient didn't want to live—it's a fact, Gort."

His bloodshot eyes met her tired brown: "Not trying to tell me Angélique's lost interest in living, are you?"

"Yes—yes, I am."

"On what ground do you base that assumption?"

"My own observation."

"Meaning?"

"That a beautiful young woman of her type doesn't try to commit suicide just because a child of whom she was extremely fond goes berserk and——"

"But Angélique loved little Butch."

"Then you really believe it was because of what happened up on the hill last night that she threw herself off the cliff?"

"Hardly—yet—— Oh, I don't know."

"It might be an idea if we try to iron a few things out," she urged, slipping a silver pencil from a pocket of her tunic. "I appreciate how you feel, but it's no use your going in there thinking Angélique's going to fight for her life—you've got to make her do that, Gort."

"How?"

"Don't ask me."

He was looking her way again: "In other words, you don't give her any chance of pulling through."

"As matters are now, I don't."

"But the position isn't hopeless?"

"No."

"Thank God for that—poor kid's badly smashed up, huh?"

"Beyond severe internal injuries, she was amazingly lucky. I know the spot well, it's littered with rocks, but apparently she missed them. A miracle, really."

"I see." Gort was watching his companion's pencil as it moved to and fro between its owner's hands. "How many bones broken?"

"Two ribs."

"Nothing else?"

"Only a number of lacerations on back and thighs—bruises, too, of course."

"And what about the internal hæmorrhages?"

"They've been stopped—I think."

"When should you know for certain?"

"By tonight?"

"And if by then everything's O.K.?"

"We'll still be battling to save her."

"How come?"

Sister Almond looked up:

"Because, as I said, our patient doesn't want to live."

That tremor playing around the man's mouth slid to his bottom lip, then spread itself:

"How in the hell do you know, Val?"

For once her eyes did not avoid his:

"Want the truth, don't you, Gort?"

"Nothing else."

"Well, right up to the moment Dr. Anderson started to etherize Angélique she kept whispering: 'Please let me die'—what's more, I'm certain she meant it, too."

An ugly leer was pulling at both corners of Gort's mouth.

"You're slipping," he muttered, "slipping downhill fast."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Well, Angélique was unconscious and wouldn't have the slightest clue of——"

"Ah, no, she wasn't," Sister Almond disputed, pointing her pencil at him. "While we were wheeling her into the theatre she came to—was in great pain, of course. But putting two and two together, do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"That Dr. Balant's past was not all he would have us believe, and last night something happened which forced him to bring a few skeletons out of the cupboard. Seems the only plausible explanation, doesn't——"

Both turned when Dr. Anderson's voice reached them. He was walking across the lawn accompanied by Sir George and carried a small brown-leather bag:

"We're doing our best, Saunders," he said, watching Sister Almond assisting Gort to his feet. "With a bit of luck she'll be all right. Damned lucky, though. Another ten minutes and it would have been too late, Internal hæmorrhage—you know."

Three pairs of eyes watched Gort trying to overcome the emotion rising to his throat. He was still fighting hard when Sir George saved him from a humiliating breakdown.

"There's nothing you can do by staying here, old chap," the Commissioner said, behind a flat-sounding laugh. "They're absolutely determined no one can see Angélique until tomorrow night at the earliest, so how about coming over to my place and having some breakfast—splendid idea, what?"

Gort wanted to decline, wanted to find some quiet spot where he could get rid of his pent-up feelings without being heard, but before his shuffling feet had covered a dozen yards Sister Almond linked her arm through his and said firmly:

"Much more of this and we British will declare war on America—come on, soldier."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE longest day in Gort's memory was drawing to a close and the sky over Vila, as if reflecting the spirit of its people, was packed with dark clouds. After breakfast at the Residency he had returned to the mainland and for most of the afternoon could have been seen wandering around the hospital garden. Near ten o'clock, however, on noticing Dr. Anderson's arrival in a taxi, he had taken up a place near the steps to wait for news of Angélique. Time was creeping on towards midnight when the medico, accompanied by a nurse, came on to the veranda. Gort heard him ask: "Have you any idea where I might find Saunders?" and the Sister saying something about seeing M'sieur over there some time ago.

"I'm here," he called, stepping on to the drive. "Could you spare me a few minutes?"

For answer Dr. Anderson took the steps two at a time and, reaching the tall shadowy figure, spoke:

"I've strict instructions not to return to the Residency without you tonight, Saunders. Sir George was most emphatic about it."

"That's very nice of him," Gort rejoined, "but I've booked a room at Madame Journez's and——"

"Who cares about that?" Dr. Anderson interrupted, throwing an arm about his companion's shoulder. "I've a launch waiting for us at the wharf."

"How is she, Doc?"

"Well as can be expected."

"Meaning just what?"

"That up till now her condition had not deteriorated or improved. The blood transfusion we've just given her should do the trick, though."

"Then there is a chance?"

"I'm getting more confident every hour, old chap—let's go."

Without a protest Gort fell into step. They had cleared the hospital and were heading along Rue Higginson before either attempted to break the long silence. It was Dr. Anderson:

"Everything considered, you've stood up to this lot very well, Saunders."

"That's because I've no feelings left, Doc."

"Reaction, old son. Your nerves have taken a real beating, don't forget."

"I'll say."

"Have you any clue as to why this happened, Saunders?"

"I can understand the first part—about little Butch."

"So can I—Larkins got his deserts, but what followed has got me really stumped. There seems no earthly reason for Angélique to attempt suicide; if there is, I can't put my finger on it—can you?"

"All day I've been searching for an answer to that one," Gort replied grimly, "but like yourself I'm still groping about in the dark. I know Dr. Balant objected to Angélique's friendship with me and that last night she intended to try and ascertain why, but I can't associate anything they could have discussed with this tragedy—although only a few weeks ago her father— Well, anyway, it still doesn't make sense."

Dr. Anderson was too shrewd a man to have missed the sudden confusion in his companion's voice, but he did not attempt to press for an explanation immediately, instead said in a casual sort of way:

"You had met the old boy, of course?"

"Only a few times."

"Interesting cove, wasn't he?"

"Very."

"Any idea why he objected to you?"

"Probably thought Angélique could have done much better." Gort, on the defensive, because of his near-slip of a minute ago, was wondering if any good could be served by telling Anderson about Dr. Balant's visit to Makeeta. Deciding finally against breaking a confidence, he went on: "Could be, the poor old guy hated Americans—I give up."

"Me too—anyway, here we are."

As they stepped on to the wharf a small motor coughed, then burst into life. Its put-put-put filled the night with sound, grew louder and more definite as both men approached. The Resident Commissioner's jetty was beginning to take shape when Dr. Anderson, who had been unusually quiet since leaving Vila, spoke:

"Assuming we save Angélique—what happens?"

Gort withdrew his right hand from the cool water.

"How do you mean, Doc?"

"Well—do you remain here?"

"That depends."

"On Angélique?"

"Sure."

"You'll marry her?"

"Any time, any place, anywhere."

"Might be just as well to wait for a while, old chap."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know," the doctor hedged, puffing hard at his cigarette. "From the moment I came face to face with Angélique I thought she was far too beautiful to be real—always regarded her as a nymph stepped out of the sea sort of thing, and after what happened over there last night I'm more convinced than ever she is."

Gort leaned forward quickly:

"Enlarge on that, will you?" he muttered. "Say in straight-out English exactly what you mean."

Dr. Anderson smiled into the darkness:

"It's all surmise on my part, Saunders—could be damnably wrong; but since you told me about Dr. Balant objecting to your seeing his daughter I've been thinking hard—too hard possibly; yet"—he paused to take one last draw from the weed, then threw it overboard—"I can't get out of my head that Angélique has a very unusual background, and last night she was told something which culminated in her attempted suicide—could be, you know."

The little boat bumped gently against the jetty's solid timber, but Gort did not move; he just sat there with fingers tightly entwined, staring across at his companion through eyes neither friendly nor hostile. A lot of things were beginning to take shape in his mind, things which up to a moment ago had been scattered about like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. Now everything was being put together—speculation leant against logic and from these he was conjuring up a picture to suit himself. Sure—sure, Doc Anderson had something there all right. So the old boy hadn't married, eh, and last night when Angélique forced his hand, he had spilled the works. Poor little kid—so that's why she jumped off the cliff. What a damn pity she hadn't come out to see him and this wouldn't have happened—no, sir. When a man loved a woman the way he loved Angélique, nothing mattered, not even—

The doctor spoke:

"I'll help you off, old chap."

"Thanks."

Nothing by way of conversation passed between the two men until they had almost completed the stiff climb to level ground. Here Gort drew them both to a halt.

"I'll take a breather," he said; "my legs have just about had it."

"There's no hurry—that grade's a bit stiff—about one in three if I'm any judge."

Gort's eyes were sweeping from right to left:

"I'm sure glad it's dark," he muttered presently. "Sure am."

"Why, Saunders?"

"Well, little guy—I first met him on this track."

"I heard about it."

"Swell kid, wasn't he?"

"One of the best."

"I can still see him standing just along there, with a huge bunch of flowers and a basket of mangoes—I was very rude to him that morning."

"You were?"

"Sure—you see old Sam had just died."

"And what happened to the mangoes and flowers?"

"They ended up in the harbour—we stood somewhere near here watching them go rolling down the hill—seems a hell of a long while ago."

"I bet it does."

"Queer business life, isn't it, Doc?"

"In what way?"

"Oh, you know—one day it kicks a man in the guts and the next pushes him right up into the clouds, but I guess there's nothing we can do about it, eh?"

"No, worse luck—how are your legs feeling?"

"O.K."

"Then we'd better get going—it's late."

"Right."

Lights from the Residency windows were rolling back the darkness when Gort, blowing hard, paused and tapped his companion on the chest:

"I think we've solved a great mystery tonight, Doc. Fact is, I'm certain of it."

"About Angélique?"

"Sure—doesn't make the slightest difference to me, you know."

"What doesn't?"

"The old chap not marrying."

Dr. Anderson opened his mouth to speak. He wanted to say: "The question worrying me, Saunders, is the nationality of Angélique's mother. Everything on the girl's side suggests she was white, yet I've a sneaking idea it might have been otherwise. I've nothing to back it up, mind you—nothing at all, but seeing you're in love with her I thought I'd better get it off my chest." The sentences formed and ready for utterance were never spoken, however, because Sir George's voice floated across the garden:

"I hope you've good news for us, Doctor," he said, placing a hand on Gort's shoulder. "What's the latest?"

"Encouraging—we seem to have stopped the hæmorrhage anyway."

"Splendid! When they sent for you tonight I feared the worst. She's still unconscious, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes."

"And where did you find this fellow?"

"At the hospital."

"Glad you did—feeling better, Saunders?"

"Still in a bit of a daze, Sir George."

"We all are—but now for some coffee."

"If you don't mind, I'll miss out," Dr. Anderson said, suppressing a yawn. "I've still got a few jobs to do before turning in and coffee has a habit of keeping me awake."

"Then a whisky?"

"No, thanks—good night."

They watched till his figure moved beyond reach of the light's golden fingers, at which Sir George, with a muttered: "There goes a really grand fellow, Saunders," led Gort towards the house.

During her husband's nine years in Vila Lady Gollan's reputation as the perfect hostess had become an accepted fact. An attractive woman of forty-seven whose tender skin remained unblemished after two decades in the tropics, she had proved a worthy partner for Sir George from the day when, as a young man, he had been appointed Vice-Consul at Nagasaki. An excellent conversationalist, plus an upbringing that allowed her to discuss practically any subject, she had brought to Vila a charm and grace that from the moment of landing had endeared her to its people.

Had any of her friends been present tonight, however, they would have noted immediately the change in their hostess.

Usually so bright, she had spoken not more than a dozen words since Gort entered the room, appeared ill at ease and frequently during supper she had cast appealing glances at her husband, who, for some reason, seemed just as determined to avoid them.

Gort, notwithstanding his troubled mind, was suddenly made aware of Lady Gollan's silence, and interpreting it as displeasure at his being invited to stay overnight, he reached for the walking-stick resting against his knee:

"If you'll excuse me, I'll go to my room now," he said, rising. "The coffee was very nice."

"It's not long after midnight," Sir George returned, looking at his wife for the first time in minutes. "Anyway—we've something to tell you, haven't we, dear?"

"I'd much rather not discuss the matter further." Lady Gollan's blue eyes were challenging her husband's. "After all, Mr. Saunders has been through enough for one day, and——"

"I thought we'd thrashed out that point, Phyllis."

"I thought so, too—but I can't bring myself to do it."

"If it's anything about Angélique I'd rather hear it right away, Lady Gollan," Gort muttered, sinking back into his chair. "Much rather."

"A most extraordinary thing," Sir George said, running fingers through his goatee beard—"could have knocked me down with a feather when my wife told me the story. I've never been so shocked in my life—that's the truth, old chap."

Gort was looking straight at his hostess:

"It does concern Angélique then?"

She ran her hands nervously up and down the tapestry-covered arm-rest:

"Yes, unfortunately. I've known of it for years, but until a few hours ago kept my own counsel." She smiled sadly. "The first part of this great tragedy I told to Sir George after returning from a holiday at my brother's plantation in 1931. It was in a small island in the Ellice group, Nānumea, where I first heard the story, and one day on a visit to Niutoo my sister-in-law pointed Dr. Balant out to me."

Lady Gollan sighed from an old memory. "That sight I'll never forget. He'd only just returned from a year's debauchery and looked like a man whose soul had been torn to shreds—unbelievably dirty, hair protruding from several holes in his topee, he walked through the tiny village carrying a baby who, in a direct contrast to his own filthy appearance, was wrapped in a clean white rug." The speaker paused to

dab a handkerchief against her lips, then proceeded: "I left for home the following week, and as the years went by the tragedy of Dr. Balant faded. In fact, I'd almost forgotten him when, on October 14th, 1942, a few days after we arrived in Vila, I noticed our friend riding along what was then called Rue de Commerce accompanied by the most beautiful child I'd ever seen—Angélique, of course."

"There's a coincidence for you, old chap," the Commissioner said, holding a light to the cigarette which for minutes had been hanging from the right-hand corner of his guest's mouth. "Wouldn't believe such a thing could happen, would you?"

If Gort heard this masterly piece of understatement he ignored it, and Lady Gollan proceeded:

"Naturally I was terribly interested, but after a few discreet inquiries and learning of the esteem they enjoyed in ~~the~~ community, I did what any decent woman would have done—kept quiet, tried to erase from my memory the things I had heard during my stay at Nanumea."

There was a silence. Sir George's sympathetic gaze kept moving between his wife's stiffly sitting figure and Gort's eyes, which every second became more confused. Lady Gollan, much calmer now that her ordeal was almost at an end, was trying to avoid their guest's questioning stare, yet every now and then the power of his despair drew one of her roving glances back to him. As a woman she was terribly sorry for Angélique, for Saunders, too; but over the past quarter of an hour compassion had been swept aside by the voice of duty, and while preparing herself to do the cruellest thing life could demand of anyone, she prayed silently for courage.

Sir George spoke first:

"Tell Saunders what you heard, Phyllis—might as well get it over—right, old chap?"

"Right." Their guest was nodding his head like a man suddenly inflicted with St. Vitus's dance.

Lady Gollan pushed herself further back in the chair, then looked straight at Gort:

"If everything goes well you plan to marry Angélique, don't you, Mr. Saunders?"

"Sure do."

"You're absolutely determined?"

"Absolutely."

"Then I'm afraid I'm about to hurt you very much," she murmured, running a finger round the top of an empty coffee cup. "For some while before I visited Nanumea it appears

Dr. Balant lived in a small village on the island of Awru. It's Chief—I've forgotten his name—had a daughter who, according to all reports, was exceedingly beautiful, and just prior to my arrival had borne Dr. Balant a child, whom——"

"Good God!" Shocked nerves had brought Gort into a standing position, but when he tried to speak only a series of strange sounds passed his gaping lips. From then on he heard three voices—Lady Gollan was standing close by him saying something about dreadful shock, Sir George had hold of his left arm, kept muttering: "We simply had to tell you, old chap." A third voice, however, Dr. Balant's, was very close and clear. It whispered: "The dark abyss, M'sieur—the dark abyss."

How long he stood there Gort would never know, but when next he became conscious of space and time he was alone under a grey sky, following an arch of light sweeping from the torch gripped firmly in his right hand. He had almost reached the jetty when Sir George, who, for the past half-hour had remained within calling distance, increased his stride. Drawing abreast of the distressed man, he asked:

"Where to now, old chap?"

Gort came to a slow halt:

"What time is it?"

"Going on for two o'clock."

"I must have been wandering about for a long time, huh?"

"You have."

"How did I come by this flash-light, Sir George?"

"I pushed it into your hand as you left the room."

"Didn't break down in front of Lady Gollan, did I?"

"No, but I'm pleased you got rid of all that emotion, son. It simply had to come away."

"Cut up badly, did I?"

"What man wouldn't in the circumstances?—wager you feel better for it, too."

Gort played the torch's beam on to Sir George's launch, which, tied to the jetty, swung first one way, then the other. He followed its movement and fro for some time before speaking:

"A few minutes before the barge carrying a crowd of us scraped against the sands of Iwo Jima a kid, scared as hell he was, placed his mouth against my ear and shouted above the roar of shells: 'There's one thing we've got to remember, Captain,' and when I asked what it was, he yelled: 'Fate gives while it takes away.'" The speaker gave a crooked

smile. "We jumped together, but before he had gone more than a dozen yards Jap bullets ripped him almost in two, yet all through that day and the next I kept muttering to myself: 'You were wrong, Private Jones; Fate takes all and gives nothing. Guess you'd agree with me now, huh?'" Gort switched off the torch. "Since leaving your house, Sir George, I've travelled a long way, not in miles—distance doesn't matter when with every step a man takes he finds himself getting closer and closer to God. I haven't been alone, though. Angélique was there all the time. We strolled hand in hand through cloud, past stars to a world free of prejudice, greed, envy, hate or fear. Then someone spoke to me. Guess who it was."

"God, I suppose, old chap."

The younger man's laugh, though short, was pleasant and warm:

"No—just plain Private Jones who explained what he meant that day at Iwo Jima."

"About Fate giving while it takes away, Saunders?"

"Sure—I understand now what he meant."

"How, son?"

"Why I joined up and went to Korea, why a Communist bullet ripped half my guts out, why I came here—everything."

"Please explain."

Gort moved a few steps down the steep grade, yet his voice came back to Sir George firmly, unhesitatingly:

"Well, Dr. Balant's road through the past has linked up with the one I'll be shuffling along in the future. You see, Fate took away his self-respect but gave him Angélique, and that dum-dum bullet made a cripple of me, yet brought into my life the only decent thing he salvaged from the ruins—his daughter—Angélique again—makes Private Jones' philosophy pretty good, doesn't it?"

Sir George heard the slight click of a torch being switched on, watched darkness recede before light; his eyes, a trifle damp, followed its beam sweeping across palms, boulders and ferns, as he whispered:

"So you're still going to marry her, old chap?"

"Damn right! I am—if she'll still have me."

"But that's taking a terrible risk, Saunders. You've got to look ahead—children, for instance. What if they're born half—"

"You missed the moral of my story," the taller man

interrupted quickly. "Up till tonight I would have traded a good slice of my life for a few minutes with the guy who fired that dum-dum bullet. Now I'd probably pat him on the back and say: 'Thanks, feller.' "

"Good God!"

"Still don't get what I'm driving at, do you?"

"No—no, I don't."

"It's quite simple." Gort was retracing his steps. "To use Colonel Bassington's own words: 'Look here, Saunders,' he said to me, 'you can perform the natural functions of a husband—but children are definitely out.' " The speaker laughed softly. "When I heard that grim verdict something fell apart in me—I was bitter, bewildered, demoralized. Then I came here and met little guy. He's gone now, and although Angele and I can never have a child, we at least are left with the memory of one whom both of us loved very much—fair enough, huh?"

Sir George smiled into the white face turned his way. He felt an overwhelming desire to reach out and stroke it, but being a man he just coughed and said quite casually:

"I'd like to shake your hand, Saunders—really I would."

Ten fingers, five cool, the others moist, found each other. Then without another word both men turned and moved along that winding jungle track leading to the Residency.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE sun had gone down in a sea of crimson and already stars were popping through the blue veil of heaven when Dr. Brashuet, a thin sallow-complexioned man of about middle age, whose dark eyes behind unusually thick lenses seemed quite out of proportion in their owner's lean studious face, walked on to the hospital veranda.

"Well, M'sieur," he said, placing a hand on Gort's shoulder, "your patience has been rewarded. For two days Angélique's life—it hangs on a little thread, but now everything is good—she will live."

The younger man blew out a quick breath, then rose slowly from the steps:

"She has recovered consciousness, Doctor?"

"About an hour ago, but we must take her quietly—smoke, M'sieur?"

"I just put one out, thank you."

Smiling, Gort watched his companion light a cigarette, then lean forward with both elbows resting on the rail.

"Only one thing is troubling me, M'sieur."

"What, Doctor?"

"Angélique's mind—it is not awake. She lies there like a beautiful wax doll and is unable to concentrate. Of course, this state of amnesia may pass—usually only lasts a few hours, sometimes even days." He paused to blow a mouthful of smoke heavenward. "On rare occasions, however, people have not been able to shake it off and so remain without knowledge of the past."

"If it takes a year, I'll still be around," Gort said, throwing back his head. "Can I see her now?"

The Frenchman glanced sideways and up:

"I did not realize until this afternoon that what took place two nights ago had constituted a double tragedy to you, M'sieur."

"So you were at the funeral, too, Doctor?"

"Yes, M'sieur—do you know what compelled me to go?"

"Respect for little guy, I guess."

"Not really," Doctor Brashuet murmured, allowing the

cigarette to fall from his fingers. "Had it been left to us French people Madame White would have been buried like Larkins—as a pauper. To us, she deserved such a fate." The speaker shrugged. "But as I stood opposite the man whose love for a child transcended the reach of human intolerance, I felt the full impact of shame. Yours was a very noble act, M'sieur."

"I happen to know what little guy thought of his mother," Gort said softly. "I'll agree she was quite unworthy of him, but with all her faults he loved her."

"So you paid for them to be buried together, eh?"

"That's right."

"You are a good man," Dr. Brashuet returned with undeniable sincerity while leading the way along the hall. "Already a life has been saved by the iron lung you provided for my colleague's hospital. Anderson's no doubt told you about it."

"I don't recall his doing so—however, it was not a gift from—"

"Ah—here we are," the Frenchman interrupted, halting before a door on his left. "Do not expect too much of this poor child, M'sieur—she probably won't even know you, but——" He smiled and lifted both hands. "As we say in my own tongue, 'tout ira bien'—all will be well—after you, M'sieur."

On the threshold of a room heavy with the fragrance of frangipanni, Gort hesitated.

"Doctor?"

"Yes, M'sieur?"

"Would you mind if I go in alone?"

The physician smiled, and pushing his companion gently forward, said:

"Remember our little friend is still very ill, M'sieur, but you, I know, will do the right thing."

With every step Gort took that strange humming sound in his ears increased. He shuffled slowly, one foot dragging after the other in a laboured movement, and the stick in his right hand felt for the first time since its adoption more of a burden than a help, so heavy in fact that on reaching Angélique's bed, he felt utterly exhausted—so weary and old as to have no affinity with youth any more.

Notwithstanding his eagerness to reach a chair, he paused and still without allowing his gaze to wander from a chipped enamel cabinet, whispered: "Hello, honey."

He felt, more than saw, her face turn his way:

"Hello, M'sieur."

The voice, its unfamiliar ring and hollowness, made him wince, but when a moment later their eyes met Gort's whole being became taut with shock. Slowly, ever so slowly, the white kalsomined walls of the hospital began melting away, fell apart and were replaced by a burning town. Wonju, huh? Sure he remembered it. Nothing had changed since that morning when he and Bud Torrence worked with their bare hands to rescue a South Korean child from under a pile of rubble. Bud was speaking:

"There she is, Captain. Can you grab her?"

"I'll have a go—I'm coming down, little girl."

"Got her, Captain?"

"Not yet—this beam—when I count three—heave."

"O.K."

"Swell."

"Captain?"

"Yeh?"

"When you see a kid like that it makes you think, doesn't it?"

"You bet it does."

"How old do you think she is?"

"About five."

"For God's sake look at her, will you?"

"I have—don't want to again."

"Blood, tears and fear—that's war, ain't it, Captain? And all three are in that poor kid's eyes."

"There's something else, too, Bud."

"What?"

"Death—we're too late, I——"

"Please do not come any closer, M'sieur, please."

At the murmured request, Wonju was lost instantly behind a wall of flaked white kalsomine, but its memory lingered; for without being conscious of movement he was bent over another child, whose eyes, like those of that South Korean baby, reminded him of dark and vacant windows.

"All right, honey," he said, dropping into a chair, "don't mind if I sit, though, do you?"

She ran bandaged fingers across her pale lips.

"Why are you here, M'sieur?"

"Don't worry about that now, I'm——"

"But who are you?"

"Oh, just a friend."

"You are not telling the truth, M'sieur, and this place, I do not like it—I must go away."

"Soon, Angélique—soon."

"Angélique"—she repeated the name four times. "Why do you call me that?"

"I always have, honey."

"Then where did we meet?"

"Here—in Vila."

"Vila? I have not been there." She gave a half-smile. "I came from the island of Awru. I was born there in a village on a high mountain. Have you not heard of it, M'sieur?"

He nodded, and she went on quoting almost word for word part of her father's story.

"Hurricane . . . three days . . . ruptured appendix . . . saved him, though . . . Ampota walking into my hut . . . an astonishing moment . . . a bronze goddess wrapped in stars . . . Chief Moretta's recovery . . . offered me half his island . . . I decided to stay . . . no will-power left . . . supply of morphine running low . . . native marriage ceremony . . . months later . . . terrible realization . . . love turning to hate . . . Ampota more beautiful than ever, but many scenes . . . she attempts suicide, carried from the surf half dead . . . a hurricane blowing . . . God's voice . . . my degradation . . . Ampota and child . . . I stood with you . . . so small and white . . . she was . . ."

"Angélique." His voice, sharp with a deepening despair, at last penetrated the fog behind which the girl's mind crouched like a frightened thing; her eyes, however, did not change their expression. They remained as before, vacant as a drugged child's.

"You interrupted me, M'sieur," she said in a voice pitched to reproach. "Please do not shout like that."

His sweat-beaded lips were trembling slightly.

"You are very ill, honey, and must be kept quiet—do try and sleep."

A white face was turned quickly towards him.

"Did you see it happen, M'sieur?"

"What, Angélique?"

"The dark woman—when she pushed me off the cliff."

"No one pushed you, honey."

"It was a long time ago," she murmured presently. "Sick with fever, I craved for a breeze, and while walking through the village I noticed this woman following me—I'd never seen

her before and, although beautiful as natives go, I did not like her." Angélique, her eyes wide with terror, tried to sit up; had almost done so when Gort pressed against her shoulders.

She lay for about five minutes staring up at the high white ceiling; her small, flimsily covered breast heaving; hands clenched; but immediately his fingers released their hold she went on speaking in that same ghastly voice: "I had almost reached the mountain-top, and believing I'd out-distanced her, I paused to rest. Moonlight filled the sea, and below where I sat canoes drifted like slender sticks; there were voices, too—native voices singing in a tongue I did not understand, and away in the distance Niutoo Island loomed through a purple mist. I'd not been there long when I heard a twig snap, and noticed the woman step from behind a clump of palms. 'Please go away, I am sick with fever and want to be alone,' I said. But she did not answer—just kept moving closer. Terrified, I backed away until reaching the cliff's edge stood there pleading with——"

"That's all part of a dream, honey," he whispered, running a hand across her glistening brow. "It didn't really happen—I was with you all the time."

She stirred restlessly in the bed.

"M'sieur?"

"Yes, Angélique?"

"Would you like to hold my hand?"

"Very much."

"Then you may."

Her fingers, despite their bandages, felt ridiculously small to Gort—small, cool and pathetic. While speaking he pressed them gently:

"You must be tired, honey."

"I am."

"Then, if I promise to sit here, will you try and sleep?"

"But that woman—you will not let her in?"

"No, darling."

"M'sieur?"

"Hm—hm?"

"You have such a good face—I like you."

"Fine."

"What's your name?"

"Gort."

"And where do you come from?"

"Two Springs—Kentucky."

"Sounds nice, too."

"It's only a small place, honey."

"Like Awru?"

His lips moved to answer the question, but on noting her eyes closing, he sighed and kept silent.

Dawn's silver glow was filling the room when Gort stirred. Up till an hour ago he had managed to keep awake with the assistance of several cups of strong black coffee brought to him by the Sister on duty, but near three-thirty sheer exhaustion had forced him to rest his head on the pillow beside Angélique's.

✧ Rising stiffly, he shuffled about the room for some minutes until something like normal circulation had been restored, and was about to resume his seat when a movement from the bed brought him to a standing position.

On seeing him she smiled:

"Hullo, M'sieur."

His taut lips framed a bitter grin. He knew that any second Angélique's slowly stirring senses would awaken to threaten whatever chance they had of happiness. Yet, now, in this moment of great crisis, he failed them both—failed, because to try to prepare her for the terrible awakening was the most urgent desire he'd ever known. Voiceless as a mute, he stood watching her eyes. A minute ago they had been of great beauty—green pools of languor, shaded by long curled lashes—but they were changing; were reverting to that vacant, far-away look, and the hand in his was growing cold—cold as the fingers of death.

"You must not return with me to Awru, M'sieur," she murmured, in a voice he could just hear. "I think you are good and kind, but in the village there are wild people—they might harm you."

Still clasping her hands, he sat on the edge of the bed.

"We'll not be going back to Awru. That all happened many years ago when you were only a baby, honey."

She smiled in a pitying sort of way.

✧ "Poor M'sieur is a stranger, and does not understand. He looks at me and his mind is saying: 'All my life I have known this girl. As children we used to swim together in that blue lagoon close by the village where she was born.'" That half-smile riding Angélique's lips spread to both corners. "But it is not true, for until a few months ago when you arrived here in your little white schooner, we had not met,—please be honest with me, M'sieur."

"I'm trying to be, Angélique."

Her eyes, wide-open and child-like, dropped from his, then with the air of one studying the contents of a room for the first time, began taking in one object after another. He followed their slow course from pedestal, flowers, water-jug, window and walls, before asking:

"Feeling a little easier, honey?"

"I am very well, M'sieur—and you?"

"Oh, fine—fine."

"Once I was going to die," she said quietly, "and everyone in the village is sad, but one morning, when it seems I cannot last more than a few hours, my servants carry me out into the warm sun so I can watch your little white boat at anchor. Everything was very still, and across the bay a seagull was gliding with motionless wings in great wide circles." She gave an almost soundless laugh. "For a long while I watched you mending something, a sail, I think it was, then when I am getting tired, you look towards where I am sitting, wave your hand, and already I feel much better—remember that day, M'sieur?"

His lids were closed, yet through their slits a trembling line of tears showed.

"Sure—sure I do, honey."

Her roving gaze finally came to rest on the walking-stick balanced against Gort's knees. She gave it a full minute of intense concentration before asking:

"Whose is that, M'sieur?"

"Mine, Angélique—I've been using it for some time."

"Yet I do not recall seeing you with it before," she muttered, frowning. "What happened?"

"I was badly wounded in Korea."

"When, M'sieur?"

"Going on nine months ago."

"And now—you use that stick all the time?"

"All the time."

"But why?"

"Because I can't get along without it, honey."

"Oh——" Her questioning eyes were sweeping his face again. "Where is Korea?"

"A long way from here."

"You had a plantation?"

"No—there was a war."

"War, M'sieur?"

"Hm, hm—it's still going on."

"M'sieur?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Why are you crying?"

"I'm not—my eyes are very sore."

"Then why do you not bathe them?"

"I will later."

"If my father were alive," she whispered, behind a quick smile, "he would have prescribed something for you. Poppa was such a clever surgeon, and——"

"So they say."

"Who, M'sieur?"

"Everyone here."

"They still talk about my Poppa?"

"Sure do, honey."

"After all these years?"

"What happened to your father, Angélique?"

"He died when I was only a little girl."

Gort sat gazing down at that white face turned towards the window. In the early morning sunlight it seemed transparent, for under her clear, smooth skin tiny purple veins showed with almost startling clarity. Presently he sighed and leaned forward.

"I want you to concentrate very hard for a minute, darling."

"Ah, but I have," she said, rolling her head from side to side, "everything, it is in my mind. The village where I was born; the mountains; that long strip of yellow sand along which we used to race each other; our blue lagoon, and your little white boat sitting in the bay, its flapping sails dyed red with every sunset." She paused to slip her hand from under his, then resumed: "If I thought very hard I could remember so much, M'sieur; the night Poppa died, that horrid woman I told you about, those smells which, in the heat of summer, rose from the native quarter, but these things I want to forget—am I not wise, M'sieur?"

Her question brought Gort's shoulders upright. Until a few seconds ago he would have given ten years of his life for the return of Angélique's memory; had believed this was imperative before either of them could face the future with any degree of hope, but now his thoughts were moving along other channels. "Let matters rest as they are, feller," he told himself. "Happy, isn't she? So why not leave her that way? Sure, sure. Isn't it far better for both of us if——"

He started violently when she spoke.

"Your face—I do not like it any more, M'sieur. It is sharp with cunning and makes me afraid."

He smiled and made as if to reclaim her hands, but in a quick movement she drew them out of reach, saying:

"Go away, you are a bad man—go away."

Astonishment kept Gort rooted to the spot for a minute. He didn't know quite what to do. One voice urged him to sit down and wait in the hope that this mood might pass. The other was just as adamant on his leaving immediately; but foolishly he tarried long enough for her sudden distrust of him to crystallize into stark terror. A moment later screams, shrill and heart-chilling, sent him stumbling to the door.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AS the two men came into view Sister Almond guided her canoe beside a large flat-topped rock, then, with the air of a woman suddenly overcome, inhaled deeply. Her eyes followed them down the jungle track. Sir George had one of his arms through Gort's. She caught a word here and there of what they were saying, which, because of the serious nature of their conversation, only added to her mood of depression. She was thankful when Sir George halted about twenty yards away and drew his companion to a halt. For the next few minutes only the echo of their voices reached her, but when Gort made as if to walk away, the Commissioner spoke in louder tones.

"Everything's perfectly clear, old chap; anyway, we'll be keeping in touch with each other."

"Sure, we will."

"Great pity it had to turn out this way, Saunders—I'm terribly sorry for both of you."

"That's life, I guess, Sir George."

"In the hard way, eh?"

"Darned right."

"Of course, it might take a long while before Angélique is anything like the girl we used to know—that's why I think you should have waited a little longer."

"It's forty-six days since she regained consciousness, Sir George, and I'm at the end of my tether. If I hung around here another week, I'd be a nervous wreck."

"That's understandable, old chap—how did she react when Anderson told her about your getting out?"

"Poor kid never said anything."

"Didn't even shed a tear, eh?"

"Not in his presence."

"Perhaps she hasn't any left."

"Could be."

"I wonder what got under her skin that morning, Saunders?—when you were at the hospital, I mean."

"God only knows, but obviously she associated me with something dreadful—you could see it in her eyes."

"Which, of course, is the reason why she becomes hysterical nearly every time you go near her—great tragedy, no doubt about it."

"Awful."

"A good cry wouldn't do you any harm either, son."

"Right enough."

"Where is the *Comte du Pont* due in Frişco?"

"September 4th."

"Slow trip, eh?"

"That's how I want it."

"You've lost a lot of weight, Saunders."

"Yeah—better be getting along now, Sir George—thanks for all you've done."

"Wish I could have done a lot more—good-bye, old chap."

Sister Almond did not watch Gort climb into the canoe. For the next seventy-five minutes she wanted to appear tough, to convince him beyond any shadow of doubt that his impending departure left her quite unmoved.

"You ought to know better by now," she remonstrated when the craft lurched dangerously. "If you want a ducking, I don't."

"Sorry—shall I push it off now?"

"Why not?—I've been waiting long enough." She felt his embarrassed gaze, and in her distress was more angered than saddened by it.

"I had no idea you'd keep me over an hour," she added after making half a dozen rapid sweeps with the paddle. "Whatever were you doing?"

"Lady Gollan insisted on my having afternoon tea," he returned quietly. "Then Sir George and I strolled over to the hospital and had a yarn with Doc Anderson—I like that guy."

"While I was cruising all over the harbour?"

"Pretty sore, aren't you, Val?"

"Wouldn't you be?"

"Maybe—I don't know."

She was paddling at about forty sweeps per minute, and urged on by despair, increased the rate. Noting this, Gort asked: "How about my taking over? You'll knock yourself up."

She glared across at him.

"Oh, keep quiet!—can't you see I'm in a hurry."

Two months ago Gort might have laughed; but, devoid of humour this afternoon, he flushed and said:

"If that's the case you'd better drop me at the wharf."

"Don't be stupid."

"What in the hell's biting you anyway, Val?"

"I'm annoyed."

"Well, how about handing me that paddle and simmering down a bit?"

"I will when I'm ready."

"Got quite a paddy, haven't you?"

"Sometimes."

"O.K., I'm sorry again—how's that?"

"Very big of you, I'm sure."

Shrugging off his anger, he glanced towards the *Comte du Pont*. It lay in midstream, smoke curling lazily over the lip of its single stack. Smiling grimly, he watched copra being lifted from a small barge; followed the bales as, hoisted by a screaming winch, they were swung out, then dropped into a circle of yelling natives.

"Gort!" Her voice was much softer now.

"Hm, hm?"

"How exactly do you feel about leaving?"

"Guess I'm glad—couldn't have stood this much longer."

"You mean Vila?"

"No, sitting opposite a little ghost—just like that, isn't she?"

"I wonder why, Gort?"

"Search me."

"I'm certain of one thing, though."

"What?"

"It's all to do with her father—something he told her that night."

"Perhaps."

Mud was sliding beneath the canoe when Sister Almond spoke again.

"Wake up—we're there."

Through the corner of her eyes she watched him rise, but when he took particular care in climbing out she forced a laugh.

"Don't be scared, dear—there's no chance of your upsetting us here—the tide's out."

He grinned and held out his right hand.

"Well, I guess this is it, eh, Val?"

"No, Gort, I'll wait for you over there—near King Lung's shop."

"I'll probably be some time."

"What odds?—it's my day off—come on."

They walked across the coarse beach sand in silence; land

crabs scattered before their approach in great haste, and three seagulls glided and swooped overhead. On reaching Rue Higginson, he paused to light a cigarette; drew hard at the weed before looking at her.

"Do you ever pray these days, Val?"

"Occasionally—why?"

"Well, how about starting right now?—keep going till I return."

"I'd fun out of words, dear." She gave a broken smile.

"Unless you've time to teach me a few new prayers."

"Trouble is, I only remember one myself."

"Not much help, are you?"

"Guess not—so long."

He was climbing into a taxi when she called:

"Gort?"

"What?"

"I'll commence when you're out of sight."

"Swell!"

The car had turned into Rue Bougainville before Sister Almond's assumed calm deserted her. Crying silently, she stood under the veranda of King Lung's shop, looking at, but not seeing, the pile of crackers, tinned food and toys displayed behind a none-too-clean window.

"Oh, dear God!" her heart kept saying. "Oh, dear God!"

Attired in a simple yet beautifully cut white linen frock, Angélique lay face down on a patch of lawn across which a hibiscus tree in full bloom threw its protecting shade. Here, since her discharge from hospital a fortnight before, she had spent the greater part of every day, ignoring all callers; sitting for hours on end, hands entwined, staring into space.

Around three o'clock this afternoon, however, when the dark agony inside her became too much to bear, she had slipped from a chair and sought the comfort of that sweet-smelling lawn.

It was half an hour later when she heard a taxi pull up near the gate, followed minutes later by footsteps scraping across the path. She shuddered as they drew nearer, and the man she had learned to fear with an all-consuming dread spoke:

"Taking it easy, eh, honey?"

She kept her face hidden in those long blades of grass.

"You have broken your word, M'sieur."

"I did promise not to call again, Angélique," he confessed,

coming to a stop, "but I just couldn't go without saying good-bye—my boat's due to leave at four."

"That I already know."

"Doesn't give us very long, does it?"

"If the *Comte du Pont* were a hundred miles from here I should feel much happier, M'sieur."

"Why, honey?"

"Because you terrify me."

He sighed, and leaned forward heavily on the handle of his walking-stick.

"That's very unjust, Angélique. For weeks I've begged you to try and justify this fear, and now, when the ship waiting to take me away from Vila is almost ready to sail, I'm still guessing, and groping at shadows—hardly fair, is it?"

"As I've told you many times before," she whispered, sitting up, yet turning her face so he could see only part of its profile, "I do not understand why I'm this way myself, M'sieur. I know you've tried hard to make me like and respect you, but these days I trust no one, not even Burea, and she's been with us many years."

His dismayed eyes swept towards the *Comte du Pont*, then back to her.

"If it were possible for me to tear the veil from your mind, honey, I should still not do it, because while such an act might restore me to my rightful place in your affection, it could not shut out reality, or the circumstances which are responsible for this terrible calamity." He gave an uncertain smile. "I didn't hurt you, dear, not by word or deed. I arrived in Vila with my morale shattered, didn't care a damn what happened, but 'little guy' gave me something to hang on to, and you brought a new meaning into my life. That's all gone now. Our little friend's dead; you fear me; and Makeeta will become the property of a Mr. Farram within the next few weeks—cock-eyed world, isn't it?"

He watched her rise, then stand caressing the smooth pink petals of a huge hibiscus. She had never looked so beautiful to him before; back straight as a young pine; head erect, lips parted slightly, face awed like a child's who pauses on the threshold of a nursery filled with new toys, Angélique presented an unforgettable picture of young womanhood nearing absolute perfection. He frowned as though in regret when she spoke:

"You talk of things I do not feel, M'sieur; say things which might, or might not, be true, but what is the use when this

love you speak of finds only emptiness in me, and I tremble whenever I hear your voice—please, you must go now.”

His unsteady mouth closed tightly for a moment, then opened: “So this is the end, eh, honey?”

“The end, M’sieur? When I do not know of even a beginning?”

“That’s very cruel—I’ve been hurt too, you know.”

“Have you?”

“Angélique?”

“Yes?”

“Can I write to you?”

“If you do, I shall not read your letters.”

“I see.” With a great effort he choked back the cry in his throat. “I—I don’t suppose you’ll even allow me to shake your hand?”

“No.”

“But I’ll not see you again, and——”

“Your taxi-driver is getting impatient, M’sieur.”

“I know, honey.”

“What is the time?”

“Three-fifty.”

“Which only leaves you ten minutes, doesn’t it?”

Gort nodded. And because he knew that to remain with her another second would be to his everlasting shame, he breathed a hardly audible “Good-bye, Angélique,” and shuffled away.

On joining him in the taxi, Sister Almond did not speak, for, though feeling much better, after her short display of weakness, she was immediately conscious of Gort’s struggle against his own. They were only a short distance from the wharf when the *Comte du Pont*’s sirens gave three sustained blasts.

“Keep your chin up, soldier,” she muttered, squeezing one of his hands, “the show’s almost over.”

“Sure am glad you’re here, Val,” he murmured, “sure am.”

“Me, too—how was she?”

“Just the same.”

“And so broke your heart, eh?”

“Cut it right in halves.”

“You’ll get over this, dear.”

“In about thirty years, I guess.”

“That’s what I thought too, once, Gort.”

“But you’re made of tougher stuff than me.”

"Don't believe it!" She laughed shortly. "Your trouble is you fell in love with the wrong woman—climb out, soldier."

Gort had only a hazy recollection of what transpired over the subsequent five minutes. He remembered a crowd closing in about him; of shaking a lot of hands and being pushed, more than guided, along the wharf. Then suddenly he was standing beside Sister Almond in the back of a speeding launch. Not until its healthy-sounding motor had been shut off did she speak:

"It's been nice knowing you, anyway, Gort—very nice."

His gaze did not leave the *Comte du Pont's* smoking funnel.

"Want to hear something, Val?"

"What?"

"If I ever come across that guy you married, I'll punch him in the nose."

"Give him an extra one for me too."

"Sure will—where'll I let him have it?"

"Right over the heart—please."

"O.K.—blubbering, aren't you?"

"A bit."

"Then take this handkerchief, and blow your nose."

"Thanks—how's that?"

"Sounded pretty good to me."

"I suppose you'll go straight to your cabin?"

"You bet."

"Hurry, dear, the man's waiting to help you on."

"Holy Cow, so he is!"

"And Gort?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't let's say good-bye—I couldn't bear it."

"Doubt if I could, either," he whispered, patting her on the shoulder. "So long, honey."

She watched him being assisted up the gangway; watched until tears dissolved his stooped figure, and the clanging of ship's bells filled her throbbing ears with a hundred haunting sounds.

The ship was swinging away from its moorings when Angélique, moving with that peculiar gliding gait of a drugged person, closed the front gate.

Since Gort's departure strange things had been happening to her, and for the past twenty minutes the girl's eyes, as if drawn by an irresistible fascination, had not once left the *Comte du Pont's* busy deck.

She walked slowly at first, but when Captain Bouchier acknowledged the small craft now moving shoreward with three sharp blasts, she gave a little cry and broke into a run.

With the speed of a young deer fleeing from a hunter's gun, she ran along Rue Henri Sautot, turned into Mele Road; had covered a good quarter of a mile before the rapid tempo of her small sandalled feet slowed to a trot.

Taking in short, choking breaths, she crossed the beach, and after thrusting her face into the cool water of a rock pool, began the arduous four hundred odd yards to Devil's Point. Over sharp-edged boulders and coral reefs, exposed by the afternoon's ebb-tide, she climbed. Once, falling heavily, she lay for some time with fingers clawing at the soft black mud which, in her terror, seemed to suck her down like quicksand. Utterly exhausted, she might have remained there had not a colony of hungry land-crabs left their holes to investigate. When one, a little more curious than the rest, began propelling its shell-protected body across her hand, she screamed, and flicking the slimy creature off, rose in panic.

The *Comte du Pont*, steaming at half-speed, was making towards the open sea when Angélique reached her objective: a mass of rocks across which the frowning cliffs of Devil's Point cast its ominous shadow.

Minutes passed before she lifted her trembling body from a patch of coarse sand and, still on knees, crouched there staring across the harbour. Angélique didn't know what hidden power had brought her to this spot; she'd been standing quietly at the gate, pushing it to and fro when a voice, softer, much more convincing and persuasive than any she had ever heard, had whispered: *He is a good man, my child; you have misjudged him, and now that little ship is taking him out of your life for ever. Go now, while there is still time, do not be frightened—nothing on land or in the sea can harm you, child, nothing.*

The *Comte du Pont* was directly opposite her before Angélique straightened. It seemed such a long way off, and above the rippling surface of water four glistening fins showed in the dying sunlight; but she was not afraid, for that beautiful voice, mellow and soul-uplifting, was speaking to her again:

The past is dead, Angélique, you shall live out your span of years without torrent, fear, self-condemnation, or regret.

The future stretching before you is a friendly road, so go forward, then, my child, with a mind free and unsullied.

.

Arms curled behind head, a cigarette hanging loosely from his mouth, Gort lay listening to the rhythmic beat of diesel motors. Since entering his cabin half an hour before, he had re-lived a whole lifetime. Every incident of importance, pleasant and otherwise, he'd allowed to slip through his thoughts with almost malicious gratification.

In a mood for hurt, he had smiled cynically at memories which, ordinarily, would have made him sigh. For the bitter flash-backs, however, he had reserved a special place: his father's death; Jenny Lynne; Iwo Jima; Korea; his sterility; old Sam; little guy and Angélique. Everything with the power to sting, he had dwelt on as a sadist might gloat on the sight of blood or human agony.

A sentimentalist at heart, Gort had become a slave to his own despair. It suited the man's mood to remain in this narrow-gutted cabin with its stale smells, cockroach-marked walls and shabby furniture, while pain slashed unmercifully at his crying heart; for, if nothing else, it would keep him down below until night drew her dark curtain across the New Hebridean coastline.

Presently a half-grin slid along the dreamer's lips. "Just listen to those temperamental Froggies yelling at the top of their voices. Sure, the motors had stopped. But it was no concern of his; probably only dropping the pilot, anyway. Tricky harbour, Vila; took a bit of navigating with its reefs and currents. He laughed shortly: "Lucky Saunders, huh? Sure, that's what they used to call him at college—Lucky Saunders—the guy who couldn't go wrong in class or on the playing field." Hell, what a joke! How many would change him places today? He'd like to shuffle up to any one of them and—

"M'sieur, where are you? Where are you?"

Six shuffling steps brought him to the door; another carried him across its threshold, to halt there as if transfixed, staring along the corridor at the end of which stood a dripping figure surrounded by a crowd of men.

"My God!" It was only an astonished whisper, yet even in that din of excited French voices it was heard by Angélique. Still powerless to move, he watched her frightened eyes sweep his way. The next instant she was running towards him.

CHAPTER XXIX

SHE stood alone, eyes half-closed, fingers resting lightly on the ship's rail, gazing across a moonlit sea. Early tomorrow morning the *Comte du Pont* was due to arrive in Papeete, but it might have been a thousand miles away, for neither atoll nor cloud showed before or above the steamer's gently rising and dipping bows. A night wind blew in gentle gusts against the girl's uplifted face, bringing with it a fragrance suggestive to her of palms, sea-washed beaches and coral reefs, while above in that splendid sky, a solitary albatross hurtled through space on soundless wings. Angélique, her lovely figure lost under a pair of Gort's jeans and shirt, which notwithstanding their rolled cuffs and deeply gathered seams, still created the impression of a teenager rather than of a young woman, had hardly moved since coming on to the upper deck. But now, hearing that familiar shuffling sound, she looked over her shoulder and called:

"I'm here, darling."

The man's voice held a pleasant ring.

"Well, honey," he said while walking round an open hatch, "Dave Brown's probably receiving the good news right now, and within an hour I'll wager all Vila will know what's happening tomorrow—sorry for being so long, though."

"I was just about to go and find you," she laughed, linking her arm through his, "the dinner-gong went some time ago."

He grinned and patted the fingers curled about his wrist.

"Feeling peckish, Angélique?"

"No—just happy."

"Then what say we miss dinner tonight?"

"Oh, yes, please."

"Swell!"

She sighed, and leaned forward, like him, over the rail.

"The radio message—who did you send it to, again, dear?"

"Sir George Gollan."

"I still can't remember him."

"Why try, honey?"

"But I don't like being this way," she confessed wistfully.

"In my past there must have been a host of pleasant memories

—Poppa, and people who were our friends; the boy you call 'little guy.' How much nicer it would be if I could discuss him with you, yet he too is just another of the many ghosts who lurk in the shadows of my mind."

He placed her hand palm-down on the rail, then covered it with his.

"There's a very important thing I want you to remember, Angélique."

"What, dear?"

"That hurt crouches beside joy in most people's past,—you mentioned 'little guy.' To the day I die I'll always remember him, the way he used to smile, what we talked about, his laughter and courage. They are the pleasant reflections, yet there are others I'd like to forget, but can't."

"Such as Gort?"

"The cruel things—being forced to stand helplessly by, listening to him coughing his life away—the memory of wiping blood from his lips."

"Once, you say, there was a great love in my heart for that little boy," she murmured with rising emotion. "We had picnics together; spent happy days in his company, but tonight the name is quite foreign to me—rings like the peal of a bell I've not heard before." Her eyes, touched with tears, found his. "Why should it be so, darling—why should it?"

Before speaking he lit the cigarette held between his tremulous lips.

"God told you ten days ago, didn't He, honey?"

"God did?"

"Yes, the voice you heard before swimming out to this ship. Remember what it said?"

"Every word."

"Then isn't that your answer?" he asked quietly. "As I see the future, you must remain a child of two worlds, Angélique. One God has swept aside, shut out of your mind for ever; the other we'll start building tomorrow when some preacher in Tahiti pronounces us man and wife—right, isn't it, honey?"

Crying softly, she slipped her fingers from under his and walked to the opposite rail; stood there gazing across that endless expanse of moon-drenched water. His first impulse was to follow, but, on reaching the hatch, something told him not to intrude upon her thoughts. Minutes passed before she stirred.

"Gort!"

"Yes, honey?"

"You really believe that the voice I heard belonged to God, don't you?"

"I'm absolutely certain of it."

"But why should He speak to me?"

"Guess because He loves you very much, Angélique."

She turned quickly, and for another twenty seconds or so Gort watched a dawning joy, a radiance he'd never seen before, flooding a woman's eyes—then, suddenly, she was in his arms.

"Both of us, darling," she whispered—"both of us."